



Flirting with My Billionaire Enemy

Author: *Cindy Ray Hale*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: When the player you reject at the club turns out to be the boss at your new job. Ariana After making me over, my cousin takes me dancing to celebrate me landing my dream job. At the club, a hottie tries to pick me up, but I turn down the cocky player. I'm too focused on my career to date. But he makes my pulse race, and I find myself watching him from across the room. Fast forward to day one at Keith Enterprises where I'm hired to design software that will save billions. The player from the club, Kaison Keith, billionaire son of the CEO, is standing right in front of me, and we're assigned to work together. Only he doesn't recognize me in my boxy suit with my hair in a bun and my oversized glasses on. I don't like him, but I can't help but check him out when he's not looking. Kaison I feel like a fool when I realize the new hire is the same girl I was hitting on at the club. She's not as dressed up as she was, but she's still just as gorgeous and driven and smart and I'm drawn to her more than before. When my mom gets injured in a car accident, we take the project to my parents' historic estate in Blue Mountain, Georgia so I can be there for her. The longer I'm with Ariana, the deeper I find myself falling. Will Ariana be able to thaw her heart, or will she remain icy to me forever?

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ARIANA

I can't believe I let her talk me into this. I definitely didn't sign up for it, but my cousin is relentless, and now I'm paying the price. And that price feels like pain.

"Why do I have to wear these heels again?" I shift my weight to take the pressure off my already-aching feet.

"Because they make your legs look a mile long in this dress." Farah twists another strand of my pitch-black hair around her curling iron. And yes, it's her curling iron. I don't own one because I don't need it. It's not like I'm trying to impress anyone.

I'm not a fan of the form-fitting blue number either. Why do people think it's a good idea to dress like this? I feel like I'm being strangled by a boa constrictor.

"Maybe I should just wear my flip flops." My favorite pair might have seen better days, but they're broken in and oh so comfortable.

Farah wrinkles her nose in disgust. "Ariana Hashemi, those things should be disintegrated."

I laugh at the way she uses my full name. "No way. They're the best after a hard day of work."

"Maybe. But not for trying to score a man." Farah releases another glossy curl from

the curling iron. Okay, maybe it does look pretty good, but it's not worth the trouble.

"I don't need a man," I say. "I thought we were going out to celebrate me landing my dream job, anyway."

"We are, but wouldn't it be the cherry on top if you found a guy too?" Farah got a faraway look on her face.

She's happily dating her perfect guy, so I get it. She wants me to be happy, too. But a boyfriend takes a lot of time, and that's something I don't have very much of. Especially not now that I've landed my new job.

Farah sets the curling iron down and fluffs my hair to loosen the curls. "There." She covers her mouth and lets out a little squeal. "You don't know how long I've been wanting to do this."

"What? Torture me?"

"No. Bring you out of your shell. You always hide behind those boxy pantsuits with your hair pulled back. Not to mention the glasses."

"It's expensive to wear contacts. My eyes are sensitive, and I have to wear the daily kind. That adds up after a while."

"And now with your new job, you can afford it and then some." Farah smiles like she's won.

"Can I look now?" I ask.

"One last thing." She grabs a tube of bright red lipstick and applies it to my lips. She looks me over and gives a quick nod. "All done."

She leads me from my bedroom to the bathroom, and Farrah angles the door so I can see myself in the full-length mirror. I barely recognize my reflection. The Persian girl staring back at me is stunning in a blue dress, showing off a tiny waist. My dark eyes are fringed with thick, long lashes, surrounded by a smokey eyeshadow. Farah had spent forever contouring my face, and my cheekbones are higher and more accentuated. My pouty lips are shiny red. My hair falls past my elbows in glossy curls, looking like extensions people would pay hundreds of dollars for. It's healthy because I always keep it up in a bun and rarely subject it to any kind of heat.

My dad was from Iran, and I inherited his darker features. I have dark hair and eyes, but my skin is lighter than most Persian women. My mom was a blonde-haired woman with fair skin. Even though my skin is light, people can still tell I'm half Persian. I have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously.

I look down at the heels I'm wearing. As much as I don't want to admit it, she's right about the shoes. I look like a supermodel in them. But that doesn't mean I'll be wearing them after tonight. Nope. I'll be right back in my comfy shoes after this. Farah won't win that battle.

* * *

The bass thumps so loud I can feel the floor shaking beneath my stilettos. Farah suggested we go to the hottest new club in Atlanta, and it is packed. She seems acquainted with everyone. My Persian uncle is from one of the wealthiest families in town, and Farah grew up brushing shoulders with Georgia's elite.

We squeeze through the crowd, past gyrating bodies, toward the bar. I climb up on a barstool, and she takes the one next to me. I don't drink often, and I don't plan to go into my first day of work hung over, so I'll have to take it easy tonight. But that doesn't mean I can't at least have one special drink. We order cosmos, and Farah holds hers up.

“To new beginnings.”

I clink my glass against hers, careful to keep from spilling the liquid. As I take my first sip, a guy with dark hair and broad shoulders takes the seat a few spots down from me.

He’s a sight for sore eyes, and I feel embarrassed for staring, though I can’t seem to turn away. With his chiseled jaw and kissable lips, this guy is the best-looking man I’ve seen in a long time. He glances our way and waves at Farah.

She waves back.

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“You know him?” I ask.

“Yeah. He comes here a lot. I never caught his name, but I heard he just got back from Dubai a few weeks ago. I heard his dad sent him there for being too much of a player.”

All the good feelings I had are quickly disintegrating. “So he just jumps from woman to woman?”

“Pretty much. I’ve seen it for myself. Flirting isn’t even legal in Dubai, so his dad thought he’d straighten up if he went there.”

I laugh. Serves him right. “So, did he learn his lesson?”

“I think we’re about to find out.” She sips her drink.

I turn and see him coming our way. The closer he gets, the better looking he is. His face is clean shaven, and he’s built like an athlete. He’s looking right at me like I’m his next conquest, which is not something I’m used to.

But I don’t want any part of it. I’m too busy to date, and I’m sure not going to be some girl on a long list of women.

“Farah, you’ll have to introduce me to your friend.” He has a light Southern drawl that washes over me deliciously. Forget him and his stupid accent.

“This is my cousin, Ariana.”

He reaches out his hand. "I'm Kaison."

I shake it, and he pulls my fingers up and kisses them in a smooth, sweeping gesture. On another guy, it might be cute, but I'm sitting here wondering how many women he's pulled the same stunt on tonight. I pull my hand away. I will not fall for this guy.

"I've never seen you here before."

"It's her first time," Farah explains.

"Well, I noticed you staring at me from across the room, and I thought I'd come say hi."

My mouth drops open, and my cheeks burn. "I—I wasn't staring."

"You were, and I'd go so far as to say you were checking me out. I can always tell when a woman is attracted to me." He leans closer to me, his icy blue eyes on me, and I can smell his cologne, a woodsy, crisp scent. I fight to keep my eyes from fluttering shut while I just sit and breathe him in. I can see why women fall at his feet. He's gorgeous. "Don't feel embarrassed," he says. "The feeling is mutual." His voice is husky, like our conversation is intimate and private, like we're alone and not in a packed room.

I refuse to get sucked in by him. I don't play these games. I sit up straight and throw my shoulders back. "You're right. I was attracted to you, but now I'm not." I smirk at him. "I'm not into guys who are full of themselves." I turn to Farah. "Should we go dance?"

"You got it, girl."

We set our drinks down, and I climb off the barstool, grabbing the hem of my dress

and yanking it down to keep me decent. The motion throws me off balance, and my foot wobbles on the blasted stiletto. It's all happening in slow motion, and I feel myself falling. I'm going to faceplant on the sticky floor and probably end up flashing the room while I'm at it.

"Look out, Ariana," Farah calls, but she's still on her barstool and isn't close enough to come to the rescue. That means I'm going down.

But then a sturdy set of arms reaches out and catches me. The aroma of the woody cologne is back, and I sense who has me. Let me say, being in his arms is not a bad thing. He's warm and feels like he's cut from stone, the muscles in his arms pronounced. I could stay here for a while. But I'd never let him know that. No need to inflate his ego any more than it already is, right?

My head smashes against his chest, and his voice rumbles against my cheek when he talks. "See? You're falling for me already."

I snap upright and back away. I want to pick up my drink and "accidentally" spill it on him. But I can't be too mad. He did just save me from flashing the entire room, after all.

I clear my throat and say in a cordial voice, "Thank you for catching me."

"Well, you do seem like quite the catch. It would have been a shame to let you fall."

I can't help but snort at the cheesy joke, and a tiny smile fights to appear.

His face splits into a wide grin, and his eyes crinkle at the corners in a way that has my tummy jumping through hula hoops. "Look at that. She can smile. You know, you're even prettier when you're not angry. You sure I can't buy you a drink?"

I may be pretty, especially after Farah working her magic, but I'm also smart, talented, and successful. More than just a beautiful face. My smirk is back. "Nice try. I'm still not interested."

He throws his hands up in the air. "Oh, come on!"

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I spin on my heel, this time steady on my feet, and grab Farah's hand. "Let's go dance now."

"You okay?" Farah asks on our way to the dance floor.

I smooth my hair down in case it got trashed from my almost-faceplant. "Yeah, I'm fine."

When we're out of earshot of Kaison, she says, "That was a bold move."

"What do you mean?" I sway from side to side in beat to the music.

"You just turned down the richest man in the room," she says.

"How do you know how much money he has?" I ask.

"I was talking to one of his friends Friday night. He comes from a family of billionaires."

Billionaires? Wow. I let the music carry my moves. The alcohol is beginning to loosen me up a little. He probably had everything handed to him. I had to work hard for everything I had. "I don't care how rich he is. I don't need a sugar daddy."

Farah shrugs in between dance moves. "It wouldn't be a bad thing. Private jets, traveling the world, yachts. That's a man who could show you a good time."

"I'm not looking for that, though. I have a career to focus on."

“Girl, you work too hard. You need to learn how to let some fun into your life, too.”

“What do you think I’m doing right now?”

“I mean more than once every few years. When was the last time you went dancing?”

“Okay, I see your point. But do you think I’ve gotten to where I am today by letting fun in my life? I don’t have time for it.” Because as soon as I take my eye off the prize, someone else will step in and take it from me. You snooze, you lose.

The only thing I do for fun is write, but even that has a career goal attached to it. I want to find an agent and get published with one of the big New York houses. It could be a nice little source of side revenue for me. I’m always looking for ways to diversify my money coming in.

Another song comes on, one of my favorites, and despite myself, I allow myself to let loose for that one moment. The music flows through me, and I close my eyes, just enjoying it. When I open them again, I feel someone watching me from across the room. I turn to see Kaison sitting at the bar. When he sees me looking back at him, he raises his drink to me. I fight the shudder that chases down my spine from having a man that attractive give me attention.

But I don’t need it. The truth is, I don’t need anyone to think I’m beautiful. There’s another reason I keep my hair up and my glasses on. I don’t want to be seen as weak. It’s a harsh world out there, and if I want to get ahead, I have to be taken seriously. It’s hard enough as a woman in a man’s world. If I were to get dolled up to go to work, it would be that much harder to gain the respect of my male peers.

I’ve kept myself ahead of the game by keeping men at bay. I’m not about to let a pair of piercing blue eyes ruin that for me now.

KAISON

“Kaison, you’re here.”

I walk into my office at Keith Enterprises, my family’s commercial real estate corporation, to see my dad leaning back in my desk chair with his feet propped up on my desk. This is new. He never shows up in my office like this.

“Hey, Dad. Making yourself comfortable, I see.” I set my laptop bag on the couch and take in the panoramic view of downtown Atlanta.

My dad pops a donut hole in his mouth. “And you’re tardy again.”

How does he even know? He must have people reporting to him. “I had a late night.”

“More partying?”

I hold back a groan. Here we go again.

But then my assistant, Corey, a skinny kid from up north, rushes into the room and says, “So sorry to interrupt. Here’s your coffee and a bagel, Mr. Keith. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I turn to him, grateful for the distraction. “Thank you, Corey.” I pick up the bagel and unwrap it.

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“I thought you learned your lesson while you were in Dubai,” my dad says from behind me.

I sigh and turn back around. It looks like Corey’s entrance hasn’t been enough to distract him from the lecture I feel coming on. I was pretty mad when my dad sent me to Dubai, but I made the best out of the situation. The place grew on me, and that was when Dad decided to bring me back to Georgia. “I did. But what’s wrong with a little fun now and then?”

“I need you to be on top of your game. There’s a long list of candidates who’d kill for your spot in this company. Don’t make me regret my decision to bring you back to the head office. Now is the time to be buckling down. Not wasting energy at the club.”

My dad often lectures me like this, but there’s an edge to his voice that isn’t usually there. “What’s going on?” I take a bite of my bagel and chew.

My dad drops his feet to the ground and stands. “We’re in trouble.”

“What do you mean?” I sink onto the couch.

He walks around the desk and begins to pace. “I just got the reports back from the finance department. It’s not good. We need to reform the program, and you’re going to be the man to do it.”

“But I thought you brought me back home to expand the business.”

“This is more urgent. Until we get our finances in order, we’re going to be bleeding out money, and I can’t have that.”

I led up the finance team in Dubai, so it makes sense that he wants me to take over at our headquarters, too. But this is a much bigger responsibility. Instead of being over the Dubai office, I’d be working on the finances for the entire company worldwide.

“When do I start?”

“Today. We have a meeting in five minutes, so I suggest you eat quickly.”

I wolf down the rest of my bagel and chase it with some coffee before heading to the conference room with a notepad and pen.

The room is packed with mostly men, all from the finance department. My dad is sitting at the head of the table, and I take a seat in the empty chair next to him. On his other side is a woman I don’t recognize dressed in a navy suit with big glasses and her hair tied back in a knot. She has a fierce look to her, like she could eat me alive. When she looks up and sees me, her eyes widen, and an unfriendly look crosses her face before she quickly schools her features into a controlled, professional expression.

What did I ever do to her? We haven’t even met, and she doesn’t like me already?

The meeting starts, and my dad says, “Everyone, welcome Ariana.”

Ariana. Where have I heard that name lately? I could have sworn I’d just met someone with the same name. Right, the girl at the club last night. Boy, she was something else. Sassy and fiery with gorgeous eyes I can’t get out of my head. Come to think of it, this Ariana has nice eyes, too. Very similar, though this woman is nothing like the one I’d met last night. She’s wearing light makeup, if any at all.

Although she does seem to hate me just as much. I'm still not sure what I've done to deserve that.

My dad continues, "She's the new software developer we hired to revamp the finance department. She created a highly successful program for Davis Corp, and it revolutionized their company. It cut hundreds of hours from their processes. That's what we need for our department if we're going to clean up the mess we're in. She's brilliant, and we're lucky to have her." I'm familiar with Davis Corp. They're another commercial real estate company in Atlanta, but they're much smaller than we are.

"Thank you, Mr. Keith," she says to my dad. "I'm honored to be a part of the company."

"We're expecting big things from you." He smiles and points both pointer fingers at her. "No pressure."

She returns his smile, and her eyes sparkle. There's something familiar about her, but I can't place it. "I think I'm up for the challenge." She's plenty nice to Dad. I guess it's just me she hates.

"Kaison, you and Ariana will be working together directly as this software is being built."

I have to work closely with this woman who hates me? Won't that be fun? Yeah, not so much.

"Ariana will need your help getting familiar with how we run things here. That's where you come in with your team, Kaison."

I nod, hiding my apprehension about working with her.

He turns to Ariana. “How long did it take you to develop the software for Davis?”

“Three months.” She smiles proudly, like she’d completely rocked it, and I can only assume that’s crazy fast for what she did.

“I’m going to need you to do it in one if we’re going to get our numbers on track.”

Her proud smile disappears, and something like panic flashes across her face for a moment before she composes her features. “Yes, sir.”

“She’s going to need all the help she can get. The entire company is counting on this team, or we could lose billions.”

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“We won’t let you down,” she says.

She’d better be as amazing as Dad seems to think she is. As amazing as she seems to think she is.

The rest of the meeting is yawn-inducing, full of numbers and statistics. Ariana is furiously taking notes. I take plenty of my own, although most of it is stuff I already know. I’ll have my work cut out for me, teaching her the ins and outs of the department. And that’s on top of my regular workload.

Dad swings his hands together in one large clap. “Well, I’ll let you all get started. We’ll meet again as a team at the end of the week. In the meantime, I’ll be checking in with you daily.”

Daily? That’s a lot for Dad. He’s a crazy busy man, who’s usually pulled in a million different directions. We didn’t see him much growing up because he was so hardworking. Our mom practically raised us by herself. Well, she did have a long string of nannies. The five boys in our family were pretty rough on them, so there was quite a bit of turnover.

We file out of the room, and I catch up with Ariana in the hallway. “I think we should meet one-on-one so I can go over how we want to get started. Whose office do you want to work in? Yours or mine?”

She doesn’t smile at me, but she’s not openly hostile either. “Yours is fine. It’s probably bigger than the closet they put me in.” Her eyes go wide, and she claps a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. The office I have is

just fine.”

But it isn't fine. If Ariana is so important to the company, why did they put her in such a terrible office? All the other men on the team have big offices, although it's true mine is the largest in the department. “Show me your office.”

She leads me around the corner, way down the hall to the area where we keep the files. In the back of that room is a tiny office with no windows. There's a small desk and a couple of chairs in there.

“This won't work. You're going to switch offices with Toby. His is right next to mine. We're going to be working together closely, and I don't want to have to traipse all the way down to this little shoebox every time I need to talk to you.”

“Toby? That's the person who assigned the office to me.”

The guy's a real tool, always belittling women. He won't be happy about giving up his office to the new girl, but that's just too bad.

“We'll handle the switch later. For now, let's meet in mine.” I lead her back past the cubicles to my office. Cubicles that are full of women. They are the secretaries, assistants, and temp workers. A few are men, like my assistant, Corey, but they are in the minority.

When we get back to my office, I gesture to the couch. “Make yourself comfortable. We have a lot to talk about.”

She settles in and opens the leather portfolio that contains her notes from the meeting. She's very professional. “Since arriving this morning, I noticed a few things right off the bat that could be improved. We need to focus on minimizing data entry, improve the management of incoming documents, and automate the payment process.”

“You already noticed all that from one meeting? I’m impressed.”

“Oh, you’re impressed?” She arches an eyebrow, and her smile turns devious. “Even if I am quite the catch?”

“I’m sorry... I’m not following. Did I miss something?”

Her mouth twists downward. “Typical. You don’t recognize me, do you?”

It all comes crashing down on me then. Ariana... the drop-dead gorgeous woman from the club. “You’re the same Ariana?”

“So you do remember me. I thought for a moment that you must have been blackout drunk.”

“I wasn’t even drinking alcohol last night. I remember everything. And I don’t regret anything I said.”

She tilts her chin upward defiantly. “I hardly think that’s appropriate, given our current circumstances. Don’t you think?”

My dad certainly won’t approve. But who says he has to know anything about what went down last night? Not that much happened. Ariana made sure of that.

I can’t get over how different she looks. I’m not used to women rejecting me, and that only makes me see her as a challenge.

I don’t care if it’s the last thing I do. Somehow, I’m going to get this girl to like me.

ARIANA

I press the delete button until the entire paragraph is gone. This story is giving me fits tonight, and it's all because I can't stop thinking about the moment Kaison walked into the conference room this morning. I was on the verge of a massive freak out, but somehow, I held it together. I wasn't happy to see him. All I could think about was how he would probably end up hitting on me at work instead of taking me seriously.

My phone dings. I pick it up from the desk where it was resting next to my laptop. It's a text from Kaison—Mr. “I Didn't Recognize You.” Yes, I'm still mad about that.

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Let's meet in my office at 9 am. Breakfast will be provided.

I glance at the time. It's almost midnight. I guess we work around the clock at Keith Enterprises. Well, we'll have to if we're going to get our project out in time. As infuriating as Kaison is, the last thing I want is for this job to be a temporary situation. The goal is to convince them to keep me on so I can work out bugs in the software and optimize it along the way. If I can't deliver the product to them in time, they may go on to find another software developer.

But I'm not willing to completely give up my writing for my day job either. It's been my dream for a long time to become a published author. I've been working on my manuscript for the past ten years, and I've queried dozens of agents. Some of them were nice enough to read it and give me feedback, and I've worked hard to get better and learn how to implement what they've suggested. But it's a crazy competitive market.

I'm about to respond to him when Farah knocks on my open door. "You still up?" she asks.

I hadn't even heard her come home from the club. I must have been too absorbed in my manuscript. "Yeah. I was just trying to get some writing in."

She's in a red dress that's about to cut off her blood supply and impossibly tall heels that look like torture devices. "How's that going?"

"Just swimmingly."

“That bad, huh?”

“Let’s just put it this way. A two-year-old could probably come up with a better chapter than I can tonight.”

She laughs. “Does that have anything to do with how your first day of work went?”

I groan. “Don’t ask.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I thought that might be why you’re struggling to write.”

“You’ll never guess who my new boss is.”

She sits on the corner of my bed and kicks off her ridiculous shoes. Sometimes I wonder if she wears those heels so she can have a backup weapon to keep the creepers off her at the club.

“Who is it?” she asks.

“Kaison, the guy from the club.”

“No kidding! You never told me you were working for Keith Enterprises.”

I shrug. “I guess it never came up.”

“So spill.” She makes herself at home on my bed, tucking her legs behind her and rolling onto her side. I have no idea how she can lounge about in that torturous-looking dress, let alone breathe. “How did Kaison act when he saw you at work?”

“He didn’t even recognize me!”

“What?” Farah’s mouth falls open.

“I know I looked different last night after your makeover, but am I really that unrecognizable as my normal self in comparison?”

Farah shrugs. “I am a master at contouring.” She jabs a finger into the air like she’s proud of herself. “And the smoky eye. Let’s not forget that.”

“I assumed Kaison recognized me, too, so when he seemed clueless, it made me hate him even more.” I stand by my decision to dress sensibly at work, though. I don’t think Kaison would have taken me as seriously if I’d come to work with a full face of makeup with fitted clothes and my hair down and loose. He probably would have dismissed me as some brainless beauty.

“Why do you hate him so much? All he wants is to flirt with you a little.”

“The last thing I want is to be objectified in the workplace. I wish he’d never seen me at the club.” The majority of my college classes were filled with dudes, and I’m working in a field that is male dominated. It’s rough being a woman in the tech industry. So I learned early on to ditch the makeup around my colleagues.

“There’s nothing wrong with flirting with a beautiful woman at the club. Isn’t that the point?”

Farah’s not going to let it drop. “But I don’t want anyone flirting with me.” I could end up falling for someone who will eventually hurt me. I don’t like too much attention on myself. Unless I’m at the office and my boss is telling everyone how amazing my work is. That’s different.

“So tell me what else happened today.”

“Some guy named Toby put me in this horrible, tiny office. Kaison ended up giving me Toby’s much nicer office. I have this amazing view now. My new office is the second nicest on the entire floor. Only Kaison’s office is better, and he’s the boss.”

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“Wow! That’s amazing.” Farah’s eyes were huge as she absorbed my story.

“Yeah, and apparently, he’s the CEO’s son. When you told me he was a billionaire, I didn’t realize that meant he works at the same company that just hired me.”

“Ariana, he’s a big deal. The guy was top of his class at Stanford.”

“I had no idea.” I’d just assumed he’d gotten his job from being the owner’s spoiled son. Now, more than ever, it’s completely out of the question to allow anything remotely romantic to happen between me and Kaison. He’s smart. That only makes him that much more attractive.

“So did he ever figure out who you were?”

“Eventually.” I shouldn’t have made the comment about him thinking I’m a catch, but again, I let my mouth run. It’s one of my biggest flaws, but hey, I’m working on it. Sort of. If I ever end up getting fired, it won’t be because of my work, it’ll be because I said something stupid.

“And now you have to work together?” Farah’s eating this up.

“He’s already texting me late at night.”

She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Because he wants you. It’s a sign.”

“He wanted the girl at the club. Not me.”

“You’re the same person. Guys don’t care if a girl is all dolled up.”

I pick up my nail file and smooth down a jagged edge of one of my nails. “Guys like him do. He probably wants some high-maintenance chick. But I don’t want him, so this conversation is pointless. It’s never going to happen.”

“Famous last words,” Farah teases. “Even he could tell that you wanted him. You were totally ogling him. I almost got a napkin to wipe the drool off your chin.”

“I wasn’t drooling,” I protest.

She smiles. “Okay, maybe not. But you’re definitely in denial.”

“Fine. He’s hot. But what good is any of that if he’s a player who doesn’t respect women? He’s exactly the kind of guy I try to stay away from. Arrogant, thinks women are disposable.”

“Maybe he’s not as bad as you think. He did give you a better office, after all,” Farah points out.

“He said it was because he didn’t want to go all the way to the tiny office I had.”

She frowns. “Oh, then maybe he’s not that nice.”

“See what I mean? We’re not exactly starting off on the right foot, and I have to work with him, and it’s going to be horrible.” It doesn’t help that he didn’t recognize me either. That still stings.

“Better get your beauty sleep then. I have an early meeting, so I’d better get to bed myself.” She hops up from my bed and scoops her shoes from the floor. “Sweet dreams.”

Farah is crazy, going to the club until late when she has to get up early. The girl barely sleeps.

Not that I'm much better. I could sleep, but it's bugging me that I can't get this chapter written. Just one more scene. I turn back to the keyboard, and after a few minutes, my fingers fly over the keyboard. Finally, the story is flowing, a better use of my words than allowing random thoughts to spew from my mouth unchecked.

I finish my scene and then remember the text from Kaison. I answer him.

Breakfast sounds good.

His response comes immediately. He's still up? He's just as bad as I am about skipping out on sleep.

Perfect. See you in the morning. He adds a winky face. How do you like your coffee?

Soy latte.

You got it. The coffee shop by the office is amazing. You're going to love it.

I'm starting to regret my decision to agree to breakfast. He's being too chatty. I need him to be distant. Professional. Not warm and generous.

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Have I not been giving him enough stay-away vibes? Maybe I should work on my death glare. I don't do office romances. But I do have to admit, he looked awfully good in the suit he was wearing today. It was distracting.

If I'm going to be working closely with him, I'm going to have to up my back-off game, be purposely cold and grouchy. That kind of stuff. Because every time I'm around him, I'm drawn to him even more. Why does he have to be so stinking attractive and charming? It would be easier if he had a dad bod or something. I could resist that. But Kaison is ripped. I felt his muscled body for myself when he caught me.

In an instant, I'm taken back to that moment in the club, and his arms are around me again. The music is thumping, the lights are low, and the only things that exist are me and him with that delicious-smelling cologne that probably costs a fortune. How many times am I going to relive that moment? It's been on my mind all day.

Stop, Ariana! I can't allow myself to fantasize about him, even if his lips look totally kissable. But as I brush my teeth and wash my face, I can't help but feel a jolt of excitement at the thought that we're going to be eating breakfast together.

This has never happened to me before. I don't get crushes on men at work. But then again, there's never been a guy who looked like Kaison at any of my past jobs.

And unless I turn into a prickly grump, I don't know how to keep it from affecting me.

KAISON

Corey brings in the coffee and a box of blueberry mini muffins from my favorite bakery down the street. “Thank you, Corey.” He sets it on my desk and walks away just as Ariana appears in the doorway. “Good morning. Come on in. This one is your coffee.” I hand it to her. “Soy latte, right?”

“Yep.” I’m hoping to get a point for remembering correctly, but she just takes the coffee to the couch and settles down without even a smile or nod. “I emailed you a copy of the task list I plan to accomplish this week. I’ve included the information I’ll need from you before I can get started on the software.”

I open my laptop and pull up the email she’s referring to. Glancing over the top of my screen, I scope her out. She’s wearing black slacks, a matching blazer, and a black-and-white pinstripe blouse. Once again, she has her hair pulled back at the base of her head and large glasses perched on her nose. She’s all seriousness, with a calm, cool demeanor that says, “I’m only here to get this job done.”

But that doesn’t deter me. It only makes me want to charm her even more. And I’m up for a good challenge. I’m not used to women turning me down. Once they hear who my family is, they’re clamoring to get my attention.

“I have a mockup already put together of what the program could eventually look like.” Ariana pulls out her laptop and walks toward me. She smells clean, like some kind of girly soap instead of an expensive perfume. Setting her laptop in front of me on my desk, she leans forward, and my senses come alive at her close presence. My skin prickles, and heat pours over me.

She clicks on her touchpad, scrolling through the basic program she’d created.

“This is impressive.”

“That’s only the beginning. Just wait until I show you the next part.” She skips through a few steps, explaining the details of how everything works in a quick, excited voice that washes over me as I fight the urge to lean closer to her. It’s clear that she’s proud of her work, which is solid. I can see why Dad was so eager to bring her on. “Once I get the details from you, I can customize this to meet the company’s needs.”

“How long do you think that will take?” I ask, aware of her closeness. I have to fight to focus on what she’s saying because my brain wants to run away with images of her in my arms, me pulling her hair out of that tight bun, letting her locks settle around her shoulders.

She doesn’t seem to notice my distraction. “That’s the part that will take the longest. And then we have to go through testing to make sure everything works smoothly.”

“How did you get this mockup working so quickly?” I ask.

She steps back and straightens, and I’m painfully aware of the newly created distance between us. “I had this done before I got the job. It was basically my portfolio. I’m assuming they liked it because I was hired.” She’s still keeping her voice controlled and professional. Is she as affected by the closeness as I am? She doesn’t seem to be, which is mildly frustrating. This girl will be harder to charm than I anticipated. Is she mad at me for failing to recognize her at our meeting? I wouldn’t blame her. I’d made quite the fool of myself, and it’ll take a while to dig myself out of that one.

She’s still beautiful dressed this way, quiet and professional, which is appealing all on its own. She exudes strength and intelligence and doesn’t seem desperate to get my attention—all attractive traits.

She closes her laptop and tucks it beneath her arm.

There's an awkward pause as we stare at each other for a minute. I can't help but take her in. Despite her standoffish demeanor, she's growing on me. "You'll have to try one of the blueberry muffins," I say to fill the space between us. I need a distraction or I'm going to keep staring at her and the awkwardness will just get worse. "They're from this amazing bakery a couple of blocks away. It's this older couple who runs it," I ramble on. "Some of the nicest people you'll meet. It's rare for the city. This place reminds me of the bakery back in my hometown."

"And where are you from?" she asks.

Her question catches me off guard. She wants to know something personal about me? That was the last thing I expected her to ask. "Blue Mountain."

"Never heard of it," she says.

"It's in the north Georgia mountains. My parents still have the house I grew up in." Well, one of the houses I grew up in—they own many—but I don't want to tell her that and make things weirder than they already are.

"Isn't that a drive for your dad to come out here from the mountains?"

Technically, he takes a helicopter, but I don't bring that up. "He has a place in the city as well." Two floors of a penthouse, but I don't elaborate on that either.

"And do you go back to visit your family in Blue Mountain often?"

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Again with the personal questions? “Uh,” I stammer, “actually I haven’t been back since I returned to the States. I’ve been in Dubai, running our finance department there, so it’s been a while.”

“Hm,” she hums. But whatever she is thinking, she keeps to herself.

That only makes me want to know what is going on in that head of hers. “What about you? Do you visit your folks often?”

She shakes her head, and her expression closes off. “No.”

Okaaaay. That’s odd. She’s willing to ask me personal questions, but she doesn’t want them turned toward her? I dig a little anyway. “Things aren’t great with the parents?”

“That’s not it,” she corrects. The unanswered question lingers in the air between us, and I finally accept that she’s not going to answer me.

Now I feel like an idiot. I’ve probably just brought up a painful topic. My plan to win her over is failing miserably. I’m way off my game. It doesn’t help that she’s so intimidating and closed off.

Maybe I just need to eat something and change the subject. I reach for the muffins, and she must have had the same thought because she leans forward, her hand brushing against mine since we apparently had our eye on the same muffin.

Goosebumps raise on my arm as her fingers touch mine. Such a gentle connection of

skin, but it lights a flame inside me.

“Sorry.” She chooses a different muffin, backs away, and returns to the couch. “I didn’t mean to bump into you.”

Is it just me or is her face a little red? Maybe she’s not so unaffected by me after all. Hope energizes me and renews my desire to win her over.

She sits up straighter, and her vulnerable expression is replaced by one of her strong-woman looks. Fierce, unapproachable, and frankly, a little scary. “Getting back on topic, the objective of this project is to revamp the financial department of Keith Enterprises and streamline the process, effectively saving the company billions.”

“And you think we can get this done before the deadline?”

“It won’t be easy. We’ll both have to work hard and stay focused. How much time do you have to devote to the project outside of your normal workload?” she asks.

“Right now, this is my top priority,” I say honestly. “The department is a mess, and the sooner we can get it fixed, the sooner we can start saving the company money.”

“Good.” A hint of relief softens her fierce expression. “Because we can’t afford to have your attention elsewhere, even if you are easily distracted.”

Wait... What? “I’m not sure what you mean by that.” Was that a jab? Well, obviously it was a jab, but what is she referring to?

She presses her lips together like she’s frustrated with herself. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No, you did. I want to know what you mean,” I press. What have I done to be

accused of being easily distracted? I've been on task the entire time. Okay, I have been a little distracted by her, but I've been discreet about that. Was that what she was referring to? If so, that would make everything a lot more awkward. Maybe I should just drop it.

"I apologize. Sometimes my mouth has a mind of its own. I shouldn't have said anything."

She actually looks...scared. I didn't know it was possible for this woman to be afraid of anything. It seems surprising that this professional, controlled woman has trouble monitoring her words. But I have to admit it's refreshing to see that she does have a weakness.

"Are you afraid you'll get in trouble?" I ask.

"It's not exactly a good idea to insult your boss right when you're starting a new job," she admits. "So I apologize. Would it be possible for us to get back on track?"

But now I don't want to drop it, even if it's a dumb idea to keep pressing her for information. "I promise you won't get in trouble. I just want to know what you meant by saying I'm easily distracted."

She releases a puff of air. "Fine. There's a rumor that you have a bit of a wandering eye when it comes to women."

5

ARIANA

Kaison stares at me for a moment, like he's absorbing my words. "And where did you hear this?"

I don't want to throw Farah under the bus, so I say, "It's just a rumor. But it seems you have a reputation."

"And why didn't you want to tell me?" He leans forward and crosses his arms. His dress shirt pulls tight around his muscled shoulders, and I have to look away to keep from drooling.

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He has a big enough head. He doesn't need to know I'm wildly attracted to him. That is a secret I must protect at all costs—even if he did guess I liked him at the club. Wait a second. He already knows I like him. I'd pretty much admitted that when I first met him. But that doesn't mean I need to remind him.

“It's unprofessional of me to have brought it up. It won't happen again.” I need him to believe me. I can't lose this job. My stupid, stupid mouth. I'm berating myself on the inside, but I keep my face neutral, with my armor of professionalism on. That armor has helped me get to where I am today. It's helped men take me seriously. It's one thing to be a woman in the workplace, but it's even harder to be a woman of color.

Kaison doesn't comment further on my accusation that he's easily distracted by beautiful women. To be honest, I'm making myself out to be a hypocrite today because I've been struggling to stay focused all morning. Kaison is one of the most beautiful men I've ever spent time with. Sure, there have been attractive men at my other jobs, but no one came close to Kaison's level of hotness. And there's definite chemistry between us, as much as I don't want to admit it.

I have to focus on this project. I can't afford to be distracted by the owner's son. He's probably spoiled rotten, anyway. I tell myself that, but I still know that, regardless of that, he's hard working and did earn his spot at the top of his class at Stanford.

We go over the procedures and financial standing of the company in great detail until it's five minutes past three and my stomach lining is about to turn inside out—either that or growl so loudly that Darlene from HR could hear it on the other side of the building.

“I’m going to need to take a break for lunch.” I stand.

He glances at his watch. “Whoa. How’d it get so late?”

“You know what they say. Time flies when you’re saving the company.”

“You make us sound like superheroes or something.”

I crack a smile because it does kind of feel that way.

“You know, you really ought to smile more.”

My smile drops. The tiniest thing—just a smile—and he’s already borderline hitting on me. Fill in the blank, and it’s easy to assume he thinks my smile is pretty. Which does nothing but weaken my stance in this company. It’s like there’s this scale. The prettier you are, the less competent you are. It’s a shame that it has to be that way.

“Hey, why the gloomy face?”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I head to the doorway and stop, glancing over my shoulder at him. “I’m going back to my office to eat my lunch.”

“Okay. Should we resume around four?”

“Three-thirty. There’s too much work to do to take an hour for lunch. And I brought a sandwich, so I don’t have to heat anything up.”

“See you at four then.”

I turn back around and head next door to my new office. It has a gorgeous view of Atlanta, and I can see the cars already backed up in traffic on the interstate. It’s a

good thing I live close to the office and can take back roads. Getting stuck in Atlanta's traffic will suck away your soul until you're nothing but an empty husk. I was lucky to find a job near the apartment I share with Farah. I used to work about twenty minutes away from home. If I ever tried to come home between the hours of three to seven, that commute turned into an hour. Eventually, I learned to take the train.

I get out my lunch and open my laptop to get in a few words on my story. It feels like I'm finally getting close to finishing this thing after a lot of years of blood, sweat, and tears. I'd better be finishing it because I'm getting to the point that I'm sick of working on it. Just when I think it's perfect, I get feedback from another publisher or agent saying it still needs work. I can't express enough how frustrating that is.

But this scene is one of my favorites, and I'm quickly sucked into the story. I must have lost track of time because Kaison appears by my side, scaring me half to death. I'd been so drawn in by my book that I hadn't even heard him come in.

"Whoa. You just scared the living daylights out of me. What are you doing sneaking up on me like that?" I demand. I twist to look up at him, and his eyes are on my manuscript.

"Did you write this?"

"I—" My mouth is hanging open so wide a fly could buzz right in there. I snap it shut. I think about lying, but what would the point be? He'd probably just catch me working on it some other time. "Well, yes. I did actually."

"This is really good. Are you planning to publish it?"

"Well... It's a long story." I don't really feel like telling him how many times I've been rejected. It's not exactly something I'm proud of. Each of those rejection letters

is a black spot on my heart. Who ever knew how painful this process could be? I mean, sure, people are always talking about how competitive it is, but you never really get that until you're in the middle of it.

“You either are, or you aren't,” he says.

I save the document and exit my word processor. “We should get back to work.” Better to stick to professional—safe—topics than to reveal too much of my painful writing journey to Kaison.

Because, let's admit it, I don't want to open myself up to him emotionally. There's no telling where this might lead.

6

KAISON

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I'm itching to press Ariana for more information about her manuscript, but it's obvious that it's the last thing she wants to talk about.

What she doesn't know is that I'm a writer too. No one—not even my closest friends or my family members—knows about it. I've kept it that way on purpose. My family gets really proud of their own, and they don't exactly keep things quiet. You'd think with us being in the spotlight so much that they'd value their privacy, but my mom discovered Twitter a few years ago and it's never been the same since. She has a huge following now, and it's worse than the media. Just wait until she tries one of those video platforms. She'll be making videos in her jammies, telling the world all our family secrets. Knowing her, it's only a matter of time before she sets up an account. My brothers and I have been holding our breath, hoping that day never comes.

So because of that, I have a secret life. I started it in Dubai when I first got there and hadn't figured out the culture yet. After a while, I figured out that social media and dating apps were the way to find women over there, and I had plenty to keep myself busy outside of working hours. But I still continued to write. It had grabbed me, body and soul, and never let go.

I don't tell any of this to Ariana, but it's on my mind as we're going over the financials for the company. We work until the sun begins to set, and Atlanta lights up like a Christmas tree.

My phone rings, and it's Dad. "I need to take this."

"No problem. I'll keep looking over these reports. Take your time."

I swipe the screen of my phone and step out of Ariana's office, heading back to my own. "Hey, Dad."

"Kaison, I have some news."

"What's going on?"

"Your mom was coming home from lunch with her group of friends today, and she was in a car accident."

"Oh, no. Is she okay?" I ask.

"We flew her to the hospital in Atlanta. She's headed into surgery."

"Do you know who hit her?" I ask.

"It was old Billy Grover. He's had one vodka too many this time. Officer Lemmings took him in for drunk driving."

Billy must have felt awful. He really is the nicest guy. He just spends too much time at The Tippy Cow. He's had a rough life and likes to drown out his sorrows with the hard stuff. "How is Mom doing?" I ask. "Is she in a lot of pain?"

"It's not looking good. She feels pretty awful."

"What hospital is she going to be in? I'm coming to visit her."

He gives me the information. "I'd like to be there when she wakes up. Where is she staying while she recovers?" I ask.

"I suggested she stay at the penthouse, but she wants to recover in Blue Mountain."

“I’d like to be there to help her recover,” I say.

“What about the project?” Dad asks.

“I’ll make sure it still gets done.”

“And what about Ariana? You can’t just leave her in the middle of the project.”

“What if I just brought her with me?”

“That could work.”

“I’ll talk to her and see how she feels about going with me to Blue Mountain.” It might be weird, but we can’t afford to be in different towns while we’re working on this project.

I hang up with Dad and head back to Ariana’s office. Her head is bent over her computer, and she’s typing away with a look of concentration on her pretty face. She’s even more attractive when she’s in the zone. There’s something about her drive that appeals to me. This is a woman who knows what she wants and is fighting to get it. I have a lot of respect for that. And she somehow finds time to write as well. The more I get to know this woman, the better it gets.

“I just heard something awful.”

She looks up and pushes her glasses up on her nose in this adorable, bookish way. “What was it?”

I tell her about my mom’s car accident. “I’m going out there to Blue Mountain to help her out while she recovers. We have staff who could help her, but she’s going to need some moral support.”

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“What about the project?” A look of panic flashes across Ariana’s face.

“I thought you could just come along.”

7

ARIANA

“Me? Go to Blue Mountain?” I ask. “We still have a huge amount of work to do.”

“And it will all get done. But my family is close knit, and when one of us is in trouble, that comes before work. But that doesn’t mean we neglect our jobs either. There’s a reason Keith Enterprises got to where it is today. We put in a lot of long hours and hard work. But the good news is that our work can be done from anywhere.”

“When would we leave?” I ask.

“My mom’s going into surgery today, so if all goes well and she can go home, we’d probably leave tomorrow morning. We’ll meet here at the start of our regular work day. That will give you some time to go home and pack tonight. I’d like to be there for my mom when she wakes up. We could have her recover at our place in Atlanta, but she’s insisted that she wants to recover in Blue Mountain.”

“And where would we be staying?”

“There’s a hotel in town. I’m sure we can get a room for you.”

If I stay behind, I can get a lot more work done than if I'm sitting in a hospital waiting room. But this clearly means a lot to Kaison and to his dad. If I come with him and show support to his family when they're going through a hard time, I'll be that much more likely to keep my job after this project is done.

It won't hurt to get to know Kaison's family, anyway. They're all the leaders of this company. I could learn a lot from brushing shoulders with this family.

"I hope your mom is going to be okay. I can't imagine what you're going through right now."

"I hope so too," he says. "So what do you say? Would you like to come along?"

"Yes. How long do you think we'll be gone?"

"At least a week. Maybe longer."

"Longer than a week?" I clear my throat. "I mean, that's fine, of course," I amend. I don't want to come off sounding like a jerk. "Just unexpected."

"I want to make sure my mom's okay and on her way to healing before leaving her."

The concern on his face is endearing. How sweet is it that he cares so much about his mom? I'd never met such a devoted son. Most guys would send their mom a text or maybe bring her flowers in the hospital. But make plans to stay for longer than a week? Not many would do that.

I wouldn't have expected that from Kaison. He seemed very focused on himself when I first met him. But now it seems there's more to him than I first realized. "You seem to be really concerned about her."

“What’s that look for?” he asks.

“What look?” I pat my face like that’s going to somehow tell me what expression I’m making.

“You’re staring at me like…” A devilish grin flits across his features. “Never mind.”

“No. What do you mean, never mind?”

“It wouldn’t be appropriate for the workplace. I wouldn’t want to be unprofessional.” But he still has a huge grin on his face that I want to smack right off him.

“If you’re trying to say I’m interested in you or something, you’d be terribly wrong.”

“Hey, I wasn’t going to go there, but since you’re opening that can of worms, I’ll address the issue.” He sits up straighter with his chest puffed out in a macho way. “Yeah. I was thinking that.”

“Well, you’d be wrong. Any expression I had on my face was purely concern for your mom. Nothing else.” Now I’m mad. How dare he think I have a thing for him? While there may be some truth to that, I’m not going to admit it to him. Even if I did mention it at the club. It doesn’t mean I’m going to do anything to act on those feelings. I’m not in the mood to lose my job. I worked hard for this gig, and I plan on keeping it and going far with this company. The last thing I need is to get involved with the pompous, spoiled owner’s son. Even if he wasn’t the owner’s son, I wouldn’t go for him because he’s a player. The last thing I want is to get played.

“I just call it like I see it.” He smiles at me like he’s won.

The self-absorbed jerk! I’ll wipe that smug grin right off his face. “I think you need to get your eyes checked because you’re—” I was going to say “you’re delusional” but

telling your boss he had mental problems wasn't exactly the best way to move up in the company. I clear my throat.

“I’m what?”

“You’re...” I scramble to find the right words. “Doing a great job as a boss.”

“That’s obviously not what you were going to say. But I’m not sure you’re right.” He stiffens. “I apologize. I was being unprofessional.”

His dad steps into the office.

My heart jumps in my chest when I see him because he almost caught me telling off his son. I’d get fired for sure.

I fly to my feet. “Mr. Keith. What an honor. What can I do for you?”

He waves a hand. “Please take a seat. No need to stand on my accord.”

I sit back down. “Yes, sir.”

“I was just walking past and thought I’d stop by to see if you’re on board to come to Blue Mountain.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you for being willing to go above and beyond for this position. I know this is unconventional.”

“It’s no problem at all. I’m happy to help if it makes things run a bit smoother.”

“You’re welcome to stay at our house,” he says.

I catch Kaison’s expression out of the corner of my eye. He looks a bit flustered. But I don’t dare turn down an offer like that from my boss’s boss.

“That’s very generous of you, sir.”

“It’s the least we can do, and there’s plenty of room for you there.”

I can only imagine. His home must be ginormous.

“Kaison will be staying with us as well, so you will both have ample opportunity to work out the kinks in this department.”

“Excellent.” I spread a smile across my face, but it feels forced. Staying in the same home with Kaison could get complicated. Especially with how flirty he’s been acting. He’d better not do that in front of his family or someone might see it and think there’s something inappropriate going on between us.

I’m the last person to have an office romance and I’m not going to let a teensy weensy attraction to my boss get in the way of my future success in this company. I don’t care how sweet he is to his mom or how soft and kissable his lips look.

Wait. What am I doing? I can’t think about his lips. Especially not at a time like this. His dad is standing right there! I have to keep my head in the game. We have a project to finish and keeping focus is my top priority.

“Well, I won’t keep you two.” He takes a step back. “I’ll see you at the house tomorrow. I have to take a quick trip to Florida tonight to meet with the head of our Orlando office. Reach out to my assistant if you need anything. Bye, Kaison.”

“Bye, Dad.”

He disappears around the corner, and I turn back to Kaison. “Let’s talk about what we’ll need to bring to Blue Mountain.”

“Most everything is digitized, but we’ll still need to pull a few files from the archives. I’ll have my assistant take care of that for us.”

Waves of heat are rolling off of Kaison’s chest and I can barely focus on what he’s saying. Do they have a pool on their property? Indoor? Hot tub? Will there be a shirtless guy involved? What if he accidentally walks in on me when I’m changing? What if I spill food down the front of me?

Why am I catastrophizing right now? Everything will be fine. But the thought of Kaison with his shirt off pops right back into my mind, and I have no idea what he’s saying anymore.

“How does that sound to you?” he asks.

“Um, sure.” I have no idea what I just agreed to. This could be bad.

“So you handle the Ferguson files, and I’ll take the Detroit office.”

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I nod and jot Ferguson on my notepad. It's tempting to start doodling little hearts with Kaison's name at this point. But I promptly put my pen down before my hand can betray me.

"So the Ferguson files?" I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with them.

"Is there a problem with that?" He raises an eyebrow at me.

"Yes, um, would you mind going over one more time what you'd like me to do with them?" I say in a tiny voice. This isn't like me. I don't do this. I'm usually on top of everything, but this man is going to be the end of me. I'm falling apart here, and I have no idea what I can do to pull myself back together. Imagine what might happen if he actually were to kiss me.

Stop, Ariana! I can't go there. As much as my mind is begging me to fantasize about a kiss with Kaison, I just can't. I'm in the middle of a business meeting. It doesn't matter that this man is delectable and kissable, and smells like a crisp morning in the woods after a rain. All fresh and clean. None of that matters. The Ferguson files are what matter right now. Focus.

My cheeks are on fire. I hope he doesn't notice. I look up from my paper.

Great. He's staring at me. I sit up straighter and lift my chin like the business professional that I know myself to be.

"You'll need to look over the files to find the places where we've been bleeding out money. Make a list of them and I'll do the same with my files. Then we'll get back

together and compare notes.”

Oh, I’d gladly compare notes with him. Wait. What does that even mean?

I clear my throat. “Sure. That sounds good to me.”

He stands up. “Great. We’ll get started there. I don’t think we’ll need any other paper files. We should be able to access everything else digitally.”

“What about the Linford files?”

He pauses and looks back at me with an impressed expression on his face. “Good catch. We’ll need that file pulled as well. You’ve been paying attention, Ms. Hashemi. Well done.”

If only he knew the truth.

* * *

“Why are you packing?”

I nearly jump out of my worn-out flip flops. “Good grief, you can’t sneak up on me like that. Way to give a girl a heart attack.”

My cousin comes into the room in yoga pants and a sports bra with her hair pulled up into a sleek black ponytail. “I thought you just started a new job. You’re leaving already?”

“I have to head to Blue Mountain with Kaison tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, so it’s going that well already.” Farah has an annoying triumphant look on her

face.

I wrinkle my nose. “Not like that. It’s purely for work,” I insist. While that’s true, there’s this tiny rebellious part of me that I’ve been trying to smack into silence that won’t shut up about wanting to take my relationship with Kaison from a work one to something a bit more personal.

“So you’re saying you don’t have the hots for him?”

“I’m not going there.”

Her eyes light up. “That sounds like a yes to me!” she squeals.

“Weren’t you the one who warned me to stay away from him?” I point out while shoving a comfy pair of stretchy work pants into my suitcase. It was one of those impulse buys where you see an ad on social media and you can’t help yourself but click on it since the sales pitch sucked you in.

Yeah, I’m that person. But to be fair, the pants were as comfortable as the ad promised. It was worth the hefty price tag they slapped onto it. But I’m willing to pay more for comfort. I’m not the type to sacrifice my level of comfiness in exchange for looking hot. I’m not looking to hook a man with my outer appearance. Sheesh, I’m not looking to hook a man, period, for that matter.

Farah leans against my door frame looking like an ad for workout clothing. “There’s no reason why you can’t have a little fun on the side.”

“There’s a long list of reasons why I can’t do that. Especially with Kaison.” I walk over to my closet and rummage through the sensible businesswear, pulling out a few blouses.

“You’re welcome to borrow some things from my closet. You know, change things up a bit.” Farah has an all too eager expression on her face that I don’t like.

“My clothes are perfectly fine.”

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“Your loss. Let me know if you change your mind. Now tell me why you’re going to Blue Mountain of all places.”

“Kaison’s mom was in a car accident, and he has to go home. But since we’re in the middle of this big project, he needs me to come along to scour through some files and to put the project together.”

“And you can’t do that long distance?” Farah asks.

I shrug. “I guess not. They’re a bit old school over there. Mr. Keith suggested that I go along.”

“Are they paying for you to have a hotel room or something?”

“No, they offered to let me stay in their home.”

“Wow. That sounds like fun. I bet their place is practically a palace.”

“Most likely.”

“You’ll have to tell me everything,” Farah says in a giddy voice. “And if anything happens between you and Kaison, I want to hear every detail. You’d better not hold out on me, girl.”

“I have nothing to hide,” I lie. “And there’s nothing to tell.”

At least not for now. And I planned to keep it that way.

KAISON

Mom's surgery was successful, and she was cleared to come home this morning. But she was going to have a tough recovery for the next couple of weeks. The timing couldn't be worse with the project we have going on. But we can still do it.

I grab my coffee from the coffee shop by my house and call Ariana on my way to the office. She picks up on the first ring.

"Good morning, this is Ariana."

"You still haven't put my number in your phone?"

"Oh, Kaison. Hi. Sorry about that. I'll make sure to save this number. I'm almost at the office as we speak."

She sounded a bit flustered and out of breath, like she had been rushing. "No worries. I'm almost there myself." I walk the short distance from the coffee shop to the office. It's a pleasant morning, so why not? My housekeeper is loading my stuff and dropping it off at the office for me. "How do you feel about a helicopter ride?"

"I was planning on driving," she says. "I'd like to have my car with me."

"Okay," I say. That changes things. "I'll ride with you then. We'll take the time to work on the project. There's no time to lose on this." We'd already lost too much with packing last night. I'd been planning on getting ahead of the game in the evenings, but that hadn't happened as planned.

"Okay. I'll see you soon."

I step into the building and pass the security at the desk in the lobby. “Good morning, Mr. Keith.”

“Good morning, Joe. How’s the wife?”

“She’s about to go into labor any day.”

“It’s a boy, right?”

“Yes, sir.” He looks delighted that I remembered.

“You’ll have to bring him in so we can all meet the little guy.”

“You got it, sir.” His smile is huge as I walk over to the elevator.

I’ve known Joe for a long time. He’s been working at the security desk for the past fifteen years. He and his wife have been trying for a baby for as long as I’ve known him, and the little guy is finally about to be born. I’ll have to get my assistant to buy the family a little outfit or something for the baby.

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I get on the elevator ,and just as the doors begin to close, a hand shoots between them. “Wait for me.”

It’s Ariana. She pushes the doors apart like she’s a superhero and steps inside. Her hair is up in her usual bun, and today she’s wearing a sweater that’s showing off a bit more of her figure than normal, something I can’t help but appreciate. Not that I’m staring or anything. I’m not a creeper. But I definitely notice. It’s a nice change from the boxy suits she’s usually hiding her curves under.

And I know she has those curves. I got an eyeful of them at the club the night I met her. It makes me wonder why she was dressed so scantily there and dresses like a nun at the office. It’s almost like she has a hidden wild side. But I can’t think about that because we’re reaching our floor, and I don’t need to be getting all hot and bothered right as the elevator doors are opening. But there’s definitely a part of me that wants to unfasten her bun and watch her luscious, dark hair fall around her shoulders. It really is a terrible shame she wears it up like that. It’s almost like a crime against humanity. Because we should all be allowed to enjoy such beautiful hair.

“So what’s the plan?” She looks over at me.

“Let’s grab those files and we’ll get some help loading them up into your car,” I say.

“You sure you want to drive in my car?” she asks. “I’m sure it’s not as fancy as what you’re used to. I mean, you’re welcome to fly in your helicopter if you want.”

“No, no. It’s no problem. I’m happy to ride with you.”

“I mean, it’s not like my car is broken down or anything. It’s a newer Honda. But it’s just a Honda.”

“Hondas are great cars,” I say.

She looks at me and her mouth quirks to the side. “You’re not what I expected.”

“What did you expect? A stuck up pompous jerk?”

Her eyes widen, and I get the impression that was exactly what she’d been expecting. I don’t like it one bit. I have nothing to prove to Ariana, but it bothers me that I’m being labeled as something I’m not. Yes, I grew up around loads and loads of money. Enormous, ridiculous amounts. My family has several private planes, a yacht, and vacation homes around the world. Many luxury cars. Racehorses from a long line of winning horses. She probably doesn’t know about all that, but she clearly seems to have some kind of idea of the lifestyle I lead and how I must have grown up.

But that doesn’t make me stuck up. I’ve fought to keep myself humble and grounded. It’s been a true struggle at times. But that doesn’t mean I’m not trying.

“I—”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry to put you on the spot like that.”

She snapped her jaw shut, her cheeks flushing.

“I’ll grab my assistant and see if he has those files ready for us. I’ll meet you in your office in ten minutes.”

She nods, and we go our separate ways. I glance over my shoulder and watch her retreating figure heading toward her office, her hips swaying as she walks. I have my

choice of any woman I want. Why is it that this one is stuck in my head? She's like a puzzle to me, and I'm a sucker for a challenge.

I can tell she's into me, but I don't think she wants to be. There's an air of conflict about her when she's around me. I've seen her at a distance when she wasn't aware I was watching. She's not normally a conflicted person. It's when I come around that she seems that way.

That kind of behavior only makes me want to win her over even more.

I call my housekeeper and arrange for my luggage to be delivered to Ariana's vehicle in thirty minutes. After gathering up a few last minute items, I head over to Ariana's office.

I smack right into something. I look down and see Ariana plastered against my chest. Hey, I could get used to this.

She springs away from me like I've burned her. "Oh, excuse me. I was just headed to see you." Her face is red, and it's really cute. It's doing funny things to my insides to see her so flustered like that. A few strands of her hair have escaped her tight bun and I want to cheer for them. She swipes them back, but they only fall back down into her face. She blows on them and then reaches up in defeat and does the most glorious thing. She pulls the elastic from her hair and it tumbles down around her shoulders, glossy and inviting. My fingers itch to reach out and bury my hands in the lusciousness of it.

But I'm a good boy, and I behave myself.

She expertly twists her hair back up into a bun and secures it with an elastic. Such a shame.

“Ready to go?” I ask.

“Yes. I still need to fill up with gas, but we should be good until we get out of the city.”

“I don’t actually make the drive from Atlanta to Blue Mountain often. I usually take a private plane or a helicopter. The traffic is so bad here, I try to avoid it like the plague.”

“Like I said before, you’re more than welcome to fly.”

But where would be the fun in that? If Ariana wants to take her car, I’ll let her. I can’t help but admit that I have another reason for wanting to ride with her, despite my hatred of the Atlanta traffic. I’m drawn to this woman. The longer I’ve been working with her, the more I want to see of her. I want to see what kind of driver she is. What her car’s like. Is she a neat freak or a disorganized mess? There’s so much about her I still don’t know. It doesn’t seem right to let that go on for much longer. I crave the ability to know her better.

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She's a puzzle I'm dying to solve.

"We have too much to do for me to fly. You drive, and I'll read some of these files aloud to you and we'll make a plan on how to best fix these issues."

She sighs. "Okay. I just don't want to inconvenience you."

"You're not an inconvenience." I clear my throat. "I mean, it's no inconvenience." I hadn't meant to let that slip and it sounded a lot more intimate than I intended. But I meant it. Every word.

But that doesn't mean it's a good idea to let that information slip out. Despite whatever attraction I feel toward this woman, I can't let myself make little slip ups like that again.

Or I'd be in a heap of trouble.

9

ARIANA

"Ooh, let's stop for snacks," I say as I spot my favorite gas station. This gas station is loaded up with everything you could possibly want. It even has a frozen yogurt bar where you can get all the toppings like gummy bears and sprinkles. I'm a sucker for some good frozen yogurt. Too bad I need to drive today or I'd totally splurge with some fro-yo. "We need gas anyway." I glance down to my dash and see that I'm a tick away from being on empty. Perfect timing.

“I don’t need snacks,” Kaison says. “My assistant packed some trail mix for me.”

“Come on. The best parts of a road trip are gas station drinks and food.”

He looks over at me skeptically. “Gas station food?”

“Okay, so maybe it’s not what you’re used to, Mr. Fancy Pants, but it’s still pretty daggum amazing.”

I get out of the car and circle over to his door. He’s still sitting there. I open his door. “You coming?”

“I guess so.”

He follows me inside and his eyes go wide as he looks around. “They have everything here.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was trying to tell you. This place is awesome. Haven’t you been in here before? They have them all over Georgia.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve actually never been in a gas station before. I’ve never had a reason to. I don’t really take long road trips by car. If I’m going somewhere, it’s with a driver, and the food is already packed. Or I’m flying, which is how I do it most of the time.”

“Well, you’ve been missing out, my friend. Let me show you my ways.” I grab his hand and tug him toward the frozen drinks. But that’s when I realize I’ve made a mistake. His hand is warm and strong in mine. I like the way it feels in mine way too much. I let go of him, but try to play it off like it’s no big deal.

“Ever had frozen Coke before?” I ask, trying to play it cool. “It’s the best here.”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“Really?” I grab a large cup and put it in his hand. “You haven’t lived until you’ve had one of these. But I’ll warn you, they make me pretty hyper.”

He chuckles. “Sounds like an adventure.”

I worry for a minute that he’s going to put the cup back, but then he fills it up with frozen Coke, and I grab a cup of my own.

“I haven’t had any of this in a while,” I say. “They don’t have any of these gas stations near where I live. But I used to live near one growing up and it was my jam in high school to go after school over there with my friends and get all caffeinated up.” Those were the days. It was the most fun I had in high school. The rest of my time was spent studying or practicing for the ACT. I never went to parties or got stupidly drunk. Farah was the one doing all of that. She jumped from boy to boy.

“What were you like in high school?” he asks.

“Boring. I spent all my time studying.”

He laughs. “You sound like me.”

I give him a look of disbelief.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m telling the truth.”

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“I thought you were the party animal of the family.”

“Who told you that?”

“My cousin.” I sip my frozen Coke, even though I haven’t paid for it yet. Sometimes I allow myself to rebel like that.

“Okay, so it’s true I have done my fair share of partying. But that wasn’t always the case.”

So he’s just going to leave it at that? “I’m sensing there’s more to the story than that.”

“There is, but that will have to be a tale for another day.”

I arch a brow at him. “Fair enough.” We were all entitled to our privacy, after all.

He starts heading to the counter to pay. “Not so fast,” I say. “We still haven’t checked out the snacks.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t want that.” He grins but follows me to the candy aisle.

“Okay.” I rub my hands together eagerly. “Let’s see what we have here.”

I snatch up a pack of Peanut M&Ms and then go for some Starburst.

“Gotta have the basics,” he says.

“I’m just getting started.” I walk to the next aisle. “Now for something salty.”

He grabs a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips.

“Nice choice. Not everyone likes them, but I’m personally a fan.”

“I haven’t tried them before.”

I gasp. “You’ve been missing out, sir.”

His gaze collides with mine, and he has an interested grin on his face. “Sir?”

“Well, you’re my boss. It seemed appropriate.”

He gives a low chuckle. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re flirting with me.”

“Dream on.” I can’t help but smile, though. I’m having fun. It’s been a long time since I’ve let this part of me show, and surprisingly, Kaison seems to be bringing that part of me back to life. Everything about me has been so serious. Would it be so bad to let loose once in a while? But I know I can’t make this a regular thing. There’s too much at stake. But right here, in this moment, I’m allowing myself to have a little bit of harmless fun. As long as Kaison doesn’t smile at me with too much interest, it’s harmless. Because his smile does funny things to my insides, and I don’t want to examine too closely what that might mean.

I grab a pack of corn chips and then some pretzels. “Okay, I think I’m good.” I throw a glance at him over my shoulder. “Wait, aren’t you going to get a candy bar or something?”

“Oh, right. Heaven forbid I forget candy.” He grabs a Snickers bar and tucks it into the hand that’s carrying the salt and vinegar chips.

“It’s getting hard to juggle all of this.” I have too much crammed into one hand and the drink in my other one. “We should have gotten drinks last.”

We head over to the register and load our haul onto the counter. I fish around in my purse for my wallet, but Kaison puts up a hand.

“Company card.” He places it on the counter and scoots it toward the cashier. “This is a business trip, after all.”

“Good point.” Not that these couple of items would have broken the bank, but it’s nice to have expenses covered once in a while by the company. That was a luxury I didn’t see much in my past job. Although I saved them millions, they were too stingy to ever treat me to anything. Unless you counted the donuts Dolores brought to the break room on Friday mornings. I’m still frustrated at how I was treated as a woman in the workplace. It didn’t matter that I dressed as conservatively as possible. Guys were constantly either talking down to me or hitting on me. It’s nearly impossible to be taken seriously in the workforce these days.

I’ll have to see if that changes now that I’m with Keith Enterprises. I have to say, it’s not great so far. Kaison has been pretty flirty. But I can’t deny that there’s a connection between us. As much as I want to. There’s something there. Not that I plan to act on it.

But I’m perfectly aware of its annoying presence. That buzzing crackling in the air is like live wires, and I’m afraid of getting electrocuted.

We head out of the store and climb into the car. Kaison settles into the seat next to me. He takes a long pull of his frozen Coke. “Wow, this is better than I expected.”

“Right? I told you.”

“I mean, it’s really good.”

“Very addicting.” I smile. “Watch out, you might turn into a frozen Coke junky.”

He laughs. “It might be too late for that.”

“Maybe they should start up an AA group for people addicted to frozen Coke. Frozen Cokeaholics Anonymous.”

“I might end up starting the first chapter.”

I giggle, feeling the rush of the caffeine hitting me. “It’s still not better than Starbucks, but it’s a lot cheaper.” What am I saying? It’s not like Kaison needs to find a good deal on his drinks. I’m sure he has plenty of cash to buy whatever drink he wants. Spending time with someone so wealthy will have to take some getting used to. Sure, Farah comes from money, but Kaison’s family’s wealth is on a whole other level.

It’s one more reason not to get too involved with him. He’s from a different world that I’ll never be able to understand. Even if I reach all the goals I have for myself, I still won’t be anywhere near Kaison’s level of wealth. Few people ever do.

It’s one thing to joke around at the gas station together, but when it comes down to the big stuff, Kaison would never be a good match for me.

And honestly, I don't know why I should even care.

But I do.

10

KAISON

The trip to Blue Mountain is over before I know it. I watch Ariana's face as she pulls up to the gate at the entrance to my parents' property. I lean across her to the open window next to her as she rolls it down.

"Hey, Lloyd." I wave to the security guard. He's a big guy who's been working for the family for a long time.

"Kaison? Is that you?" His smile is huge, his teeth white against his dark skin.

"In the flesh."

"I haven't seen you for ages." His eyes crinkle.

I get the impression he wants to know how long I'm staying, but knows better than to ask. Our privacy at Keith Manor is a top priority. There are often paparazzi hanging around, hoping to get a glimpse of our expansive property. Tall hedges surround a stone wall that encircles the entire perimeter of the sixty acres. I was pretty annoyed by all the security measures when I was a kid because it made it tough to sneak out.

I was a studious kid, but I still had my moments of rebellion, even back then. It only got worse as I got older.

Lloyd opens the gate, and I wave goodbye to him.

Ariana stays quiet as we follow the curves of the drive up to the main house. Thick woods surround us, only adding to the level of privacy the manor affords. No one gets in or out of here who shouldn't.

“How long have you guys had this place?” she asks.

“For generations. The house and land have been passed down from father to son since the 1800s.”

“Really?” Her brow lifted. “So is everything updated inside?”

“It's a mix of antiques and cutting-edge modern technology. That's thanks to my brother Langston. He's into the techie stuff. My parents are pretty old fashioned.”

“So have your parents collected the antiques or were they passed down with the house?”

“Some of both. My mom likes to shop for antiques, but many of them have been in the family.”

“Do you still have your old room in the house?”

“I do. It's pretty much the same as when I was a teen growing up here. What about you? Do your parents still live in the same house you grew up in?”

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“I lived with my grandmother. But she passed away when I was nineteen, and her house was sold off. I took my inheritance, and it paid for my education.”

I could tell she didn’t want to talk about her parents, so I avoided pressing her for more information.

She pulls up to the house, and some of our family’s staff members come outside to greet us and to take our luggage.

“This place reminds me of Biltmore,” she says.

I nod. “It’s similar for sure. Just a bit older.”

“Wow.”

She climbs out, and one of the newer staff members comes up to us and offers to park the car for her.

I haven’t been here in years. It’s strange to come back after all this time. After what happened, I’ve avoided this place. Too many memories. But my mom needs me, so here I am. Everything looks the same for the most part. My mom has changed up the landscaping a bit, but other than that, it’s just like it’s been for almost two centuries.

“Let’s go see my mom,” I say.

Ariana gives a small nod and follows me in through the front door.

The head housekeeper greets us in the foyer. A grand staircase twists up to a platform. The floors, stairs, and banister are white Georgia marble, the same found in many famous U.S. landmarks. “Ms. Hashemi, I’m Mrs. Hunt. Welcome to Keith Manor. You will be staying in the red room. I’ve taken the liberty of having your bags sent up there. Please let me know if you need anything.” She hands her a card. “You can find my phone number on this card. All you need to do is call or text me with any of your needs, and I’ll make sure it’s done.”

That was new. Usually, we just had to use the intercom system. But that was kind of old school. It was a lot nicer to be able to just text her.

“Thank you.”

“Your mother is home from the hospital and is settled in her room. I’m sure you’ll be wanting to see her.”

“Thank you. I am. I’ve been worried sick about her.” Although it was nice to drive up with Ariana. She’d mostly kept me distracted from worrying about my mom on the way up. The drive up was surprisingly beautiful once we’d passed the worst of the Atlanta traffic. It was almost enough to entice me to drive up again. Almost.

“I’m going to go find my room,” Ariana says. “I’ll give you some privacy to go see your mom.” She turns to Mrs. Hunt. “Would you mind showing me to my room?”

I head down the hall to my parents’ bedroom. My mom is propped up on the couch with her leg elevated. There’s a towel with ice packs covering her knee. The TV is on, and she grabs the remote and pauses it when she sees me.

“Kaison.” She reaches her hands out to me. “Come give your mama a big hug.”

I cross the room and take a seat next to her and melt into her embrace. “You look like

you're doing better this morning than you were last night."

"Oh, I was loopy last night, from what I hear."

I laugh. "Yeah, you were asking to see the cows and pigs."

"What in the world?"

"That's not the best part," I say. "You were also hitting on your male nurse."

She smacks my arm. "Oh, phooey. I was not."

"Yes, you were. I'm not making this up."

"You're a big fat liar, Kaison Keith."

"It's the truth. You were quite enamored." I rub my chin. "I think you said something about him having nice biceps."

She gasps. "I did not!"

"Yes, you did. You were trying to get him to let you squeeze his muscles to see how hard they were, but he rushed out of the room pretty quickly after that."

"I don't believe a word you're saying."

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“Call Langston. He was right there and saw the entire thing.”

“That’s it. I’m calling you on your bluff.” She picks up her cell phone. Within seconds she has Langston on the other line.

His voice comes over the speaker. “Hey, Mom. How are you doing?”

“Much better. But enough about that. I want to know the truth once and for all. Was I hitting on my nurse last night?”

He laughs. “You sure were. He was a pretty good sport about it. I guess they probably see that kind of thing a lot. But he did have to draw the line when you were trying to squeeze his muscles.”

“That’s it! I don’t want to hear anymore.” She’s laughing hard now.

“You did ask,” he points out. “You up for some more company?”

“Are you coming into town?”

“I should be there before dinner.”

“Our cook is making her pesto chicken tonight. I’ll tell her to make enough for you.”

She looks over at me. “Are you hungry, Kaison? I haven’t even thought to offer you some lunch. I can get the cook to whip you up some grilled cheese and basil tomato soup.”

“I’m pretty full from the drive up,” I tell her.

“What did you eat?”

“I had some food from the gas station. Chips and a Snickers bar.”

“You call that garbage lunch? You should know better than to eat like that.”

“What about Weston? He eats way worse than I do.”

“Well, you have a point there. Weston’s diet is a disaster.” She pauses for a minute, like she’s trying to figure something out. “What were you doing at a gas station? You drove here from Atlanta?” She asks it like I’ve gone nuts. “I thought you hated making that trip by car. Why didn’t you just take the family plane or the helicopter?”

“Well, Ariana wanted to bring her car along.”

“Who’s Ariana?” she asks.

“She’s my coworker. We’re in the middle of a big project so we decided to have her stay here at the house.”

“How did I not know about this?” she asks, a hint of panic creeping into her voice. “I would have made sure there was more food in the house.”

Mom is always concerned with being a proper host.

“I’m sure there’s plenty, Mom. If there’s not, we can make a list and get someone to run to the store.”

“This Ariana,” Langston says, “is she hot?”

I'd almost forgotten he was still on the line.

“She’s my coworker. I’m not going to comment on her appearance.” It seems like the most diplomatic answer I can give. If Langston figures out I’m attracted to Ariana, he’ll spread the news across the family like wildfire. And he’s not the worst one either. The one to fear is Mom, and she’s unfortunately listening to every word. In her state, she has nothing better to do with her time than to meddle in my love life. She won’t care that I’m trying to keep things professional, either. Mom is a master matchmaker. If she senses that there is a hint of love in the air, she goes ballistic.

The last thing I need is for my mom to try to convince me to be with Ariana.

11

ARIANA

The red room is decked out. It looks like something from the set of *Gone With the Wind*. There’s a four-poster bed in the center of the room, heavy red curtains with gold tassels, a red oriental carpet covering the dark wood floor. There’s an elegant bedspread in deep red with a dozen pillows piled up on it. I run up to it and jump on the bed. It wasn’t the greatest idea because the bed creaks loudly in response. Hopefully I didn’t break anything.

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I get up and walk over to the window and look out. From the second-story window, the view of the property is stunning. There's a decent view of the horse pasture with several chestnut mares grazing. There's a white stable in the distance that looks very well kept.

While Farah grew up very wealthy, I did not. My mom's parents raised me and they were comfortable, but not wealthy. This house is beyond anything I've seen before.

My suitcase and laptop bag are already sitting at the foot of the bed. I'm not used to this kind of treatment. The house, er, mansion, is surreal, and I feel like a guest in a Regency movie. I'm a sucker for a good Regency romance.

But that's not what this is. My story will not have any sort of romance in it. At least, not any time soon.

I put my suitcase on the bed and unzip it. There's a large chest of drawers across the room from the bed, so I begin filling the drawers. I have a lacy black bra in my hand when my phone rings. It's Kaison.

"I'm all done talking to my mom. Ready to get started?"

"Yes. I was just thinking it was time to dig into this project some more."

"Meet me in the conference room. Mrs. Hunt can show you where it is if you get lost."

"Okay, sounds good. I'll grab my laptop and I'll be right there."

I hear laughter and the pitter patter of little feet running down the hall. “Are there kids here?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah. Some of the cleaning crew bring in their kids from time to time. We’re pretty family friendly here.”

“That’s nice.”

I hang up with Kaison, leaving the lacy bra in the suitcase. I’ll just put it away later.

I grab my laptop and head down to the main floor to find the conference room. Mrs. Hunt sees me coming down the stairs, and she smiles up at me, her expression warm and welcoming.

“Can you show me where the conference room is?” I ask.

“Right this way.” She leads me to a massive room with an ornately carved table. Tall chairs with ornate upholstery and wooden backs are seated around the table. There are more chairs lined up against the walls so more employees can join in.

“There’s plenty of room to spread out here. Make yourself comfortable and let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you. This is perfect.”

Kaison walks in with some of the file boxes stacked up in his arms and his laptop bag strung across his body. His biceps are flexed as he carries it to the table. Not that I’m looking or anything.

He puts them down and takes his laptop bag from across his chest and proceeds to remove all the contents.

“Get ready to settle in. We’re in for the long haul here,” he says. “I thought this space would work the best because we’ll have plenty of room to spread out our files.”

“Great thinking,” I say.

He opens a cabinet and takes out some extension cords for us to plug our laptops into. There’s a TV mounted on one end of the room. He gestures to it. “We can connect to the TV and use it as a monitor as well. That way we can both see a large display of what we’re working on.”

“You’ve thought of everything.”

“Well, it’s really my brother, Langston. He’s the one who insists we need all these tech upgrades. You’ll meet him here in a minute. He’s planning to stop by.”

“Sounds good to me. Is he your only brother?” I ask.

“Hardly. You’ll meet them all. There’s a bunch of us. All boys. No sisters.”

To say that it’s intimidating to meet all the Keith brothers is no understatement. And slightly overwhelming. I can’t help but wonder if they’re all as attractive as Kaison.

“What are their names?” I ask.

“Weston, Langston, Brensen, and Ashton. Ashton and Brensen look more like our mom, and the rest of us take after my dad.”

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I could see the resemblance between Kaison and his dad the first moment I saw them together in the conference room.

“Are all of your brothers settled down?” I ask.

“Weston is, but the rest of us are lonely, single bachelors.”

I laugh. “Oh, yeah. You sure do seem pitiful.”

He doesn’t laugh though, and I have to wonder if maybe the joke he was making had some truth to it, after all. Is Kaison looking for something serious? That can’t be the case. He’s the kind of guy who seems like he surrounds himself with women.

Just then a little boy runs into the room, screaming like a banshee, waving his arms in the air. A projectile whizzes past and bounces off the wall by my head.

“What was that?” I look down and see one of my pairs of socks rolled up into a ball like I usually have them. Before I can process what’s happening, I look up to see another one coming right at me. This one smacks me square in the chest and bounces off my left boob.

The culprit is a little girl, standing with my black, lacy bra. She has it loaded already with another pair of my socks and this time she’s aiming it at Kaison’s chest.

“Young lady!” A tiny, fierce Hispanic woman comes into the room, pointing a threatening finger at the little girl. “That is not a slingshot!” She crosses the room and snatches it out of her hand. “Where did you get that?” she demands.

The little girl shrugs and doesn't even look sorry. In fact, she looks mad. "Hey, Mom, we were playing with that," she pouts.

I'm half tempted to act like I've never seen it before. Kaison is looking everywhere but at me or the bra.

But then the little girl pipes up again, "We found it in the bedroom that's all red."

Kaison presses his lips together like he's trying to keep from laughing and looks down at the paper in front of him.

"Is this yours, ma'am?" the woman asks, eyes wide.

I reach a palm out to take it from her. She hands me the bra and gathers up the projectile socks. "Actually"—she hesitates— "do you want me to take that back to your room for you?"

"That would be appreciated," I say through clenched teeth. What was I supposed to do with that bra? Set it on the table for Kaison to drool over?

"I'm so sorry about the interruption," she says, terror and humiliation in her eyes. "I won't bring my children to work with me again. It's just that my babysitter fell through today and—"

Kaison waves a hand. "It's not a big deal. Your kids are welcome here."

"Yes, but, sir. Your important business meeting was ruined."

"We were only getting started. Nothing was ruined," he assures her. The smile he's been fighting to keep at bay has won the fight and breaks loose across his features. "It's nice to have some entertainment around here once in a while. We don't get kids

here as much as we should. Frankly, it's a little too boring for my taste."

It's the last thing I would have expected Kaison to say. Knowing he's so patient with kids is a welcome surprise.

I'd have to make sure I didn't leave my stuff out in the open anymore. Who knew what was next? My underwear being shot across the room like a rubber band?

Kaison clears his throat. "Take a look at this." He pushes a document across the table to me.

I take the stapled bundle of papers from him.

"This entire department in Detroit has been bleeding out money like nobody's business."

I see the date on the top. "This dates back to the nineties. How long has this been going on?"

"I'd say we ought to find out, but I'm not sure it would be the best usage of our time. The question is, how do we fix it?"

I open my laptop. "That's where my program comes in." I find the correct page and turn the computer so he can see the screen. "With this system in place, we won't even need that department. It's slowing down all our processes. By automating everything, we can streamline the company and get the same information at the touch of a few keys."

"Won't those people lose their jobs, though?" he asks. "There doesn't seem to be much triumph in that."

“Reassign them to other positions in the company. It will require a little extra time and money to train them, but it will save the company a lot of money in the long run.”

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Kaison nods, his eyes lighting up. “And some of them can be trained to use your system.”

“Exactly.”

“You know, for someone who develops software, you seem to know an awful lot about how to run a company,” Kaison says.

“My uncle is an executive at a big company in Atlanta. He and I exchange work stories from time to time. Also, looking at the financials for Keith Enterprises,” I say, “there’s no reason to make cutbacks. Organize things in a smarter way, yes. But there’s no reason why people should have to lose their jobs.”

“But some of them might want to walk away when they realize their jobs will be changing,” Kaison says.

“Maybe. But that’s up to them.”

It’s nice, discussing the financial state of the company with Kaison. Some people might consider our conversation a snoozefest, but that’s not the case for me. I’m on fire. I want to fix this broken system, and Kaison is surprisingly turning out to be an easy person to work alongside.

I could get used to this.

KAISON

“Kaison!” I look up to see my brothers Langston and Weston in the doorway.

“Hey, guys!”

Ariana stands up from her place at the conference table where we’ve been working for the past hour.

“How’s Mom doing?” Langston asks.

“She’s awake if you want to go see her,” I say.

Langston looks over at Ariana and stretches out his hand. “Hi, I’m Langston. I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Kaison’s second oldest brother.”

She shakes his hand.

“Oh, sorry, guys,” I say. “This is Ariana. She’s the software developer we brought on to the financial department to help straighten things out.”

Weston shakes her hand next and introduces himself. “I’m the oldest. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Weston.”

“Well, we won’t interrupt you for too much longer. We’re just going to see Mom.”

“She’s in her room,” I tell them.

“Thanks,” Weston says.

“They both look like you,” Ariana says. “You were right. You guys do take after your dad a lot.”

“Where do you fall in the order of the brothers?” she asks.

“I’m the youngest.”

“Oh, the baby.” She smiles. “Does that mean you were the spoiled one?”

“We were all very blessed growing up. I don’t think I was that much more spoiled than my older brothers, but they’d all tell you I was.”

Ariana laughs, her voice a sweet tinkling sound. I can’t help but smile. Her mirth is contagious.

We get back to work, and before we know it, the sunlight has dwindled outside, and the air is filled with the smell of garlic and cooking chicken. Weston and Langston appear back in the conference room.

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“You guys staying for dinner?” I ask.

“And miss out on Lidia’s amazing cooking?” Langston turns to Weston. “Did you get a hold of Callie to see if she can make it?”

“She should be here any minute,” Weston says. “And Ashton and Brensen are on their way over, too.”

“Sounds like a party,” I say.

“I hope we don’t run Ariana off,” Langston says. “Us Keith boys can get a little rowdy when we all get together.”

“Oh, she doesn’t have a choice,” I say. “She’s stuck here.” The faint sound of the garage door going up comes from down the hall. “Looks like Dad is back from Atlanta.”

“He wasn’t here with Mom?” Weston asked.

“From what I understand,” Ariana says. “Your dad helped your mom get settled here in the house and then had to run back to Atlanta to finish out the workday.”

“How did you know all of that?” I ask her.

“I overheard some of the staff talking.”

“This one pays attention,” Langston says with a laugh.

“That’s why we hired her,” I say. “She’s a smart one.”

Dad shows up in the doorway with his coat draped over his arm. “Well, this is a warm welcome.” He looks pleased to see all of us and comes over to check out what we have going on spread across the table.

“Looks like you guys are off to a great start.”

Ariana and I fill him in on what we’ve discovered so far.

“Great. Well, just keep up the good work.” He pats me on the back. “Langston, did you hear we got a new racehorse?”

Langston follows him out the door, and their voices trail off as they head to a different part of the house, with Weston following behind.

“Should we take a break now or keep going?” I ask Ariana.

“We can keep going for a bit.” She keeps her eyes on the papers spread before us. “Until it’s time for dinner at least.”

Man, this girl really is a workaholic. I’m ready to take a break and talk to my brothers, but I allow her to set the pace. We do have a lot to do, after all.

A half hour later, Lidia comes into the room to let us know it’s time for dinner. Ariana and I go wash up, and when I arrive in the dining room, she’s talking to my brothers, Brensen and Ashton, who seemed to have arrived at some point while we were working.

Dad is sitting at the head of the table with my brothers and Weston’s wife, Callie, by his side. Mom isn’t at the table because she ended up staying in bed after being on so

many painkillers.

“How’s it feel to be home?” I ask Brensen once my dad has said a prayer and we’re all loading up our plates.

Brensen has been traveling in Africa for a while, but he’s back in the states for the holidays. Mom and Dad haven’t been able to convince him to settle down and take a position at the company yet. He’s been doing this soul journey across various countries in Africa.

“It’s very different,” he says. “I’ve gotten used to African cooking.”

“You were in Africa?” Ariana asks. “That’s so cool. What part were you in?”

“I was in Ghana, and I’m returning to visit Kenya next. But I’ve also been to Egypt and South Africa.”

“And what was your favorite so far?”

“Definitely Ghana. I love the people there.”

“That’s so cool. My family is from Iran. I still have grandparents there that I’ve never met.”

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I turn to look at her. I hadn't realized she had family in Iran. I can't imagine having grandparents I haven't met before. My family is all so close. "Really?" I say to her. "Do you have plans to go out there anytime soon?" I ask.

She shakes her head, twisting pasta around her fork. "I'd love to, but I don't see when I'd have the opportunity. But I do video chat with them and send them pictures and things. My grandma is pretty tech savvy. She's even on social media."

"That sounds like our mom," I say. "We can't keep her off Twitter."

Ashton laughs. "We have all this security here to protect our privacy, but then Mom gets on Twitter and tells everyone our business."

"Have you had a chance to meet Ashton yet?" I say.

"Yes, he was telling me he's been working in the Singapore office," Ariana says.

"That's right," I say. "But he comes back and forth quite a bit so we still see plenty of him."

"I'd love to travel like that one day," Ariana says, stabbing a Brussel sprout with her fork and putting it to her mouth.

"Stick around here, and you'll have plenty of opportunity for some travel," Dad says.

That must have been the right thing to say because Ariana's face lights up.

And suddenly, I have the urge to make her face look that happy more often. She's way too serious much too often. It was something I plan to change. If I can make her smile or laugh, I'll have done my job well.

13

ARIANA

After dinner, the Keith boys and Callie all want to go swimming at the family's indoor pool.

"You coming?" Callie asks me.

"I don't think so. I didn't bring a swimsuit."

"Oh, I actually brought two because I wasn't sure which one I wanted to wear. You look like you're about my size." She reaches into her bag and hands me a bright pink two-piece swimsuit that isn't horribly skimpy, but is still more revealing than what I usually wear. This swimsuit looks like something Farah would try to convince me to wear.

I think about turning Callie down, but then I change my mind. I don't want to come off as rude. And swimming does sound fun after the long day I've had.

"You can just change in this bathroom here," she says, opening a door to the right of us.

"I actually have my own room."

"Oh." Her brow shoots up in surprise. "You're staying here?"

“Yes. I’m in the red room.”

She leans closer to me. “Are you and Kaison an item?”

“Oh no. It’s nothing like that. I’m just his coworker. We’re in the middle of a big project, and Kaison wants to come be near his mom as she recovers.”

Callie looks at me like she doesn’t believe me. “You sure about that? Cause I saw the way you two were looking at each other at dinner.”

Was there some type of way we were looking at each other? That can’t be good. No one will believe we’re keeping things professional if there are “looks” going on between us.

“I’m sure,” I tell her. “Can you show me the way back to the red room? I’m turned around.”

“Sure.” She leads me to my room. “I’m just going to change in the room next door. Let me know if you need me to show you the way to the pool.”

“Thanks. That would actually be really helpful,” I say. I close the door and then change into the swimsuit. I take in my reflection in the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. It’s one of those huge antique ones that’s oval shaped and gold and ornate. It probably weighs more than I do. The swimsuit surprisingly fits well and is flattering to my figure without showing too much cleavage. If it had been a string bikini, there’s no way I would have worn it. I wrap a towel around myself after finding one in the bathroom adjoining my room and step out into the hallway.

Five seconds later, Callie comes out of the room where she was changing into a black bikini peeking out from beneath a see-through cover up. Her dark hair has been pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head.

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I still have my hair up from earlier, so I didn't have to mess with it.

"Ready?" she says.

"Yep."

She leads me down the hall to a back staircase that looks like it was designed for servants to come up and down the stairs in the 1800s.

"Do you come here often?" I ask.

"Yeah, Weston and I have been together for about a year now. I have a little girl, but she's with our nanny tonight."

"Oh cute. How old is she?" I ask.

"Her name is Angel, and she's eight months old. She just started crawling, and she's getting into everything."

I laugh. "How cute. You look great for having just had a baby."

"It doesn't feel that way to me, but thanks. It's nice to hear that."

"Do you work for the company too, or are you a stay-at-home mom?" I ask.

"I got my real estate license and work for the company alongside Weston."

“Working together doesn’t cause problems for you?”

“It was a little complicated at first, but it ended up working out. He was my boss, and I was his assistant.”

My mouth forms a little O. That’s even worse than Kaison and I getting together. No wonder she seems to think it’s fine for me to have a thing for Kaison.

At the bottom of the staircase is a door that leads down a long hallway with the door to the pool at the end of it. Kaison and his brothers are already in there splashing around and goofing off. Langston is clobbering Brensen and shoving him under the water, only to have Brensen pop up and return the favor.

“These men are nothing but a bunch of children,” I say.

Callie laughs. “You have no idea. Weston acts so serious all the time, but he’s just as bad as the rest of them. If we ever have a son, he’ll probably be a wild child.”

“Are you thinking about having more kids?” I ask.

“Oh, definitely. Angel isn’t his biologically. I was already pregnant when I met him. I ended up getting divorced, and now Weston is raising her.”

“That’s amazing.” I have a whole new respect for Weston now. Even if he is beating up his brothers in a chicken fight at the moment. You could think they’re all fourteen with the way they’re acting.

“Ariana,” Kaison calls from atop Langston’s back. “You getting in?”

“And get clobbered by one of you crazy boys?”

Brensen beats on his chest like he's the king of the gorillas. "Hey, we're not boys. We're men."

Callie grabs my hand. "Let's show them that they really are boys."

I glance at her skeptically. "And how would we do that?"

"By challenging them to a chicken fight, of course."

The girl has lost her mind. "I don't even know how to do a chicken fight."

"It's easy," she says. "You just get on my shoulders and then take them down." She calls out to the guys at the pool. "Weston, put Kaison on your shoulders. We're challenging you to a chicken fight."

The other brothers let out a few whoops and cheers, egging their brothers on.

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“I’m not so sure this is a good idea,” Kaison says.

“Oh, what’s wrong?” Callie taunts. “Are you chicken?”

“No.” He puffs his chest out, something I’m trying not to stare at. The boy, er, man has muscles for days. He looks way too good with his shirt off. How am I supposed to fight him? And how is that remotely appropriate given our circumstances as coworkers? I can’t put my hands on him like that.

But Callie is determined and tugs me toward the pool. The next thing I know, we’re jumping into the deep end and swimming toward the area where we can stand up.

Kaison swims toward me, and the closer he gets, the better he looks. My skin is on fire just thinking about him touching me.

“Okay, girl. I’m going to get underwater and you climb on my shoulders. Then I’m going to stand up and you’ll fight Kaison and try to knock him off Weston’s shoulders.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” I say.

“Ha!” Kaison says. “That’s what you think. It’s not so easy to take me down.”

Weston ducks under the water, and Callie follows suit. That’s my cue to climb aboard. I wrangle myself onto her shoulders and watch as Kaison does the same.

I meet his gaze as our partners begin to stand. I wobble a little at first, but then Callie

wraps her arms around my legs and I steady myself.

Kaison is rubbing his hands together like he's ready to demolish me. He might just do that. I'll probably jump right off of Callie's shoulders just to keep him from touching me too much. But that would mean giving up, and I'm no quitter.

Weston and Callie walk toward each other, and I go for Kaison before he has a chance to knock me off first.

He looks so good that it's distracting. I wrap my arms around his torso and begin tickling. His body is rock hard, and my mind almost goes blank. It's hard to focus with my hormones raging inside, pleading for me to stay in this man's arms in a very different way, but I tell them to shush. They don't know what they're talking about.

He squirms atop Weston's shoulders, his body moving under my hands, and he feels oh so good under my fingertips. "Hey, that's fighting dirty," he says. He swats at my hands to get them away from his ribs, but I come right back and go for the tender spot under his arms.

He howls and pushes me away, but I come right back.

"Weston, this woman is relentless."

"Oh, you have no idea. I'm just getting started."

His gaze meets mine, and then he does something unexpected. He licks his lips slowly, like he's thinking about something very different from chicken fighting.

Oh, no. We aren't going there. We can't. I plow into him, ignoring how amazing and addictive his body feels against mine, and I knock him from Weston's shoulders.

I pump both fists in the air, and Callie and I cheer.

“Girl power!” she screams.

“You know it, baby!” I yell, disentangling myself from her arms and swimming away from her as Kaison comes up out of the water, looking like one of those models in a perfume ad with water running down his hair and his wet, perfectly chiseled body.

But have I really won? Because now, I’m staring at him like a fool, and I feel the walls I’ve put up against him getting weaker by the moment.

14

KAISON

After swimming, I shower and change and then head over to check on my mom. She’s awake, sitting up in her bed with her leg elevated and ice packs covering her knee. She’s staring at her phone and looks up when I come in. I can hear some silly video playing.

The video stops. “Oh, hi, Kaison.” She pats the bed next to her. “Come sit down.” I climb in beside her and glance over at her phone to see the phone paused on two kittens fighting.

“Funny cat videos?” I ask.

“I need something to keep me occupied while I sit here bored to tears.”

“Maybe you can move out to the living room so you can be around us more.”

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“Maybe tomorrow. I’m getting too tired tonight.” She looks over to me. “How are things going with your project?”

“We’re making good progress, but it’s a lot and we have a tight deadline,” I say.

“And how are you getting along with your new partner?”

“Ariana?” I ask. “We’re working well together. She’s a smart girl.”

“Callie was telling me she thinks there’s something between the two of you.” Mom’s eyes are twinkling now.

I freeze. How can I get her off this topic? Once she fixates on a couple she wants to match together, she’s relentless.

“There’s nothing going on between us. I promise. It’s strictly professional.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t always have to stay that way. Look at Weston and Callie. They worked out just fine.”

“Not everyone can figure out how to make that work well for them. Most work relationships end up with heartbreak.”

“Well, one of you needs to give me a grandbaby. Angel needs a cousin to play with, and none of your brothers seem to think they need to settle down.”

“Who says I’m ready to settle down?”

“You need to stop chasing a bunch of women and focus on one girl. Callie likes Ariana. I think she could be a good option for you.”

“Kaison?” Ariana’s voice travels down the hallway.

She didn’t hear what Mom was saying, did she? Mom is notorious for talking too loud, and the voices in this house carry with all the marble everywhere.

“Is that her?” Mom asks.

I nod.

“Well, bring her in here. I want to talk to her.”

“Mom, I don’t think—”

“Kaison, is in here,” she calls out. “You can come on in.”

Ariana appears in the doorway. “Hi there. Are you sure it’s okay? I don’t want to invade your privacy.”

“It’s not a problem at all. Come here. I’d like to meet you.” She waves Ariana over.

Mom looks Ariana up and down like she’s measuring her up. What’s next? Is she going to measure her hips to see if she’s built to bear children?

There’s a bit of a frown on Ariana’s face, and I wonder again if she overheard Mom saying that I need to stop chasing so many women. Or maybe she doesn’t like being sized up like a horse at an auction.

I can’t say that I blame her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Keith. I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thank you. I’m not quite there yet, but this will pass eventually.”

Mom has a hint of mischief in her eyes, and I brace myself for whatever embarrassing thing she’s going to say next. “Where are you from, Ariana?”

“I’m from Atlanta. My dad was from Iran, and my mom was from Georgia.”

“Was?” my mom asks.

“My parents died in a car accident when I was little. My maternal grandparents raised me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“That must have been hard,” I say.

“I miss them so much,” she says.

“Do you have brothers and sisters?” Mom asks.

“No, I’m an only child.”

“And are your grandparents still around?” Does Mom have to keep interrogating her?

“No. Both my grandparents are gone now. My grandma got cancer, and my grandpa died after a heart attack.”

“Do you have any other family in the U.S.?”

“Your cousin, right?” I ask.

“Yes, I have my cousin here and her parents. Her dad is my dad’s brother. Both of them came over to the U.S. when they were in their twenties.”

It’s the most Ariana has opened up to me. Leave it to Mom to pull information from one of her victims. She could have gone into detective work with those interrogation skills.

“Well, you’re welcome to adopt us as family. We have plenty of family members to

share,” my mom says, that twinkle in her eye returning.

Adopt or turn them into in-laws?

Ariana smiles. “Thank you.”

“Of course, if you ever decide to marry into the family, you could make it official.” Mom looks like she’s about to rub her hands together with glee. “If you decide Kaison’s not your type, keep in mind that I have three other single sons, too.”

“Okay, Mom. I think Ariana and I are going to wrap up our research for the night,” I say. “I have a couple questions I need to ask her about the papers we’re going through.”

“Oh, all right.” She gets this pouty look on her face like I’ve ruined all her fun.

Ariana and I head out to the hall, and when we get to the conference room, she asks, “What was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought my mom was being a bit too overbearing.”

She laughs. “She is a lot. But it’s okay. I don’t mind her so much.” She smiles.

Huh. A girl who can handle my mom. Not something I see every day. Most women would have hightailed it out of there at the first couple of questions.

Her laptop is sitting open on the conference table. Her manuscript is open on the screen. She must have been working on it when I was first talking to my mom.

“You been writing again?” I ask.

“Yes, I’m stuck on the ending. I’m not sure how to wrap it up.”

“I can understand that. Want to send it over to me? I don’t mind taking a look and giving you some feedback.”

“You would do that?” she asks incredulously.

“Sure. I really enjoy storytelling.” I hesitate, and I don’t know why I’m admitting this, but there’s something about Ariana that makes me want to tell her my secrets. I lower my voice. “The truth is, I enjoy writing, too. It’s something my family doesn’t know about me, so I’d appreciate it if you kept that between the two of us.”

“You’re a writer?” she asks, her voice low.

“I’ve published a few books under a secret penname.”

“Why is it such a secret?” she asks.

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“Because I don’t want them telling anyone about my books. I want to be able to have my success because my writing is good. Not because I’m riding off the success of my already-known family members.”

“I can understand that. So how has it been working out for you?” she asks.

“It’s a tough market to break into, but I think they’re doing surprisingly well.”

“That’s awesome,” she says.

“Yeah, it’s fun. If you ever want to know more about the publishing process, I’m happy to teach you more about it. As long as we’re keeping it between the two of us.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” she says, zipping up her mouth. “How long have you been writing?”

“I started a few years ago. I was in Dubai and away from my family. And the words started to flow.”

“What kind of stuff do you write?” she asks.

“Crime thrillers.”

“Sounds interesting. Anything I might have heard of?”

“Possibly.”

I'm afraid she's going to ask me what my penname is, so I quickly change the subject. I'm not ready to share my secret just yet.

Maybe one day, but that day isn't here yet for me.

15

ARIANA

After getting dressed, I come down to the dining room for breakfast. The smell of bacon and waffles permeates the air, and my mouth waters.

Mrs. Keith is at the table with one of her knees propped up on an adjacent chair.

"Good morning. I'm surprised to see you out here," I say to Mrs. Keith.

Kaison is sitting next to her, and he looks amazing in a black button-up shirt. "I tried to convince her to take her breakfast in bed, but she insisted on being out here."

"I'm sick of being in there already," she says.

"I guess it doesn't matter where you are as long as you're keeping your knee elevated," Kaison says. "I'm just worried you might overdo it."

"You don't need to fuss over me," she insists. "I can take care of myself."

Lidia comes out with a platter full of waffles and another piled high with bacon.

"Everything looks delicious," I say.

We say a prayer on the food and then start loading our plates.

“You know,” Mrs. Keith begins. “Kaison is so suave with the ladies nowadays, but it wasn’t always like that. You should have seen him in middle school.”

“Mom!” Kaison groans. “She loves to tell this story.”

“He had this one girl at church he had the biggest crush on. What was her name? Rachel? Rebecca?”

“Rochelle,” he says.

“Yes, Rochelle. That’s it. He had it bad for her. But he had no idea how to talk to her, so anytime she came around, he just froze up and couldn’t string two words together. You should have seen him back then. He had these little wire-rimmed glasses.”

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“Oh, those glasses were the worst. I got picked on for those.”

“Those glasses cost a fortune!” his mom insists.

“You think those kids cared about that? They had no idea how much they cost. They still called me bug eyes.”

“Do you still wear glasses sometimes?” I ask.

“Once in a while. I have a few pairs I wear at night after my contacts make my eyes itch,” he says.

“Well, if I saw you like that, I’d be the last person to call you bug eyes.” I reach up and adjust the pair I wear most of the time.

“You don’t know how bad these glasses were. Mom was shopping for comfort, not the style.”

“Sounds like me.” I turn to his mom. “Did you know that Kaison didn’t recognize me the second time he met me because I was wearing these glasses instead of contacts?”

“Those glasses look nice on you,” Mrs. Keith says. She shoots Kaison a disapproving look. “You could have at least pretended to know who she was.”

“I had no idea. She looked totally different.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “That night I’d let my cousin give me a makeover. She pretty much

went all out.”

“Well, that would have been fun to see,” Mrs. Keith says. “I bet Kaison went crazy over that.”

I could have agreed with her, but I keep quiet. It’s not like she needs any encouragement. It’s been feeling more natural being around Kaison, and his family has been unexpectedly welcoming to me.

And that’s scary. I’ve lost so much in my life. I don’t want to get too attached. If Mrs. Keith had it her way, she’d match me up with Kaison, but what guarantee did I have that he wouldn’t return to his player ways when he got tired of me? I can’t allow myself to get too invested into something that could be taken away from me at any moment.

I’ve been letting myself get caught up in the whirlwind of his welcoming family, and I need to stay grounded in reality. There’s nothing between Kaison and me. Period. I can’t let myself forget that. As much as his mom wants us together, there’s no guarantee that Kaison is ready to settle down.

Something furry brushes against my leg, and I glance down. A gray striped kitten is rubbing all over my ankles. That’s cute and all, but I can’t be friends with cats because I like to breathe.

The cute kitty jumps into my lap, and my eyes start to water. I twist my head away and sneeze.

“Mittens, get off of her,” Mrs. Keith scolds.

Mittens’ tail flicks up above the table as she jumps down. “Sorry. I do like cats, but I’m allergic,” I say. “How many cats are here?”

“Just Mittens and her brother Zebra.”

Aww. Just what I need. Some adorable little furballs to climb all over me and make me sneeze when I’m trying to get work done. I do love kitties. But I like breathing better.

“If it’s a problem, we can have our family doctor come over and offer you an allergy shot.”

“That might be best,” I say.

“Dr. Bradley is an old family friend and has been practicing medicine in Blue Mountain for years,” Kaison tells me as we finish up with breakfast and head into the conference room to get started for the day. “He comes and makes house calls sometimes.”

We sit across from each other with our laptops in front of us, and I start building the program we need to streamline the company’s finances. After a couple of hours of hunching over my laptop, my body is stiff and my shoulders ache.

Kaison stretches and yawns, and I get an eyeful of muscles flexing beneath his fitted dress shirt.

I’ve made an effort to dress up as well. We may not be at the office, but I’m still at work. I’m in the house of my boss, and it’s more important now than ever to look my best. That doesn’t mean I have heavy makeup or anything, but I am dressed in office attire. I even put on some heels today. Farah would be proud of me. These shoes are a bit more edgy than what I usually wear, but they go well with the slim-legged dress pants I’m wearing.

“Want to take a little break?” Kaison asks.

“Sounds good to me.”

“It’s nice outside. Want me to show you around a little? We can keep talking business, but we’ll be getting a little exercise in as well.”

“Sure.”

He leads me out the front door. The air is pleasant today, and the temperature is sixty degrees according to my smart watch. The leaves are turning bright orange and rolling hills can be seen off in the distance.

As we walk, my heels begin to sink into the moist ground. So I start walking on my tiptoes.

Kaison is going on about the next steps we need to take in our project, and I’m walking alongside him, acting like there’s nothing wrong with the way I’m walking.

We get to a rocky path that leads into the woods. “We have some walking trails that cut through the property.”

Why did I have to wear these shoes today of all days? I don’t want to admit it to myself, but there might just be a small part of me that wants Kaison to feel attracted to me. It goes against everything I stand for. No men hitting on me in the workplace, and yada yada. But I’m losing my mind around this man, and it’s causing my carefully built walls to crumble.

It may or may not have something to do with the chicken fight in the pool last night. It was far from professional and kept me tossing and turning. And then my brain decided to rebel when I put on these stupid shoes. If it wasn’t for Farah, I wouldn’t have even packed them, but she insisted I needed to bring them.

They did make my legs look longer. I have to admit that. I probably look great

walking around on this rocky path if you can get past the fact that my legs are wobbling and unsteady over the gravel.

“Look up there.” Kaison points. “I think that’s a falcon.”

I take my eyes off the ground and follow where he’s pointing. That was my first mistake. The next mistake is taking a step while looking up. Snap! My heel breaks away from the rest of my shoe.

Somehow, miraculously, I keep my balance—and my cool—as I look up and spot the bird Kaison is talking about.

“You’re right, that is a falcon. A beautiful one too,” I say, pretending nothing is wrong with my foot.

We keep walking, and I continue on, one foot wobbling through the gravel and the other hovering in the air over my imaginary heel.

Kaison doesn’t seem to notice. The woods open up, and the path leads to the stables. By now, my leg is starting to cramp. I lean against the fence, acting like I’m all interested in the horses grazing before us.

“That one with the white blaze is Langston’s horse, Thunder,” Kaison says. “He’s planning to race with him next season in the Kentucky Derby.”

“Really? I’ve never seen a racehorse before.” I can only imagine that Thunder cost Langston a pretty penny. But I don’t say that because it would probably come off as rude.

I’ve never been around so much wealth in all my life. The stable looks pristine, which is quite the accomplishment for a notoriously dirty place. There are men bustling

about, shoveling manure and brushing down horses inside.

“Does Langston live nearby?” I ask, keeping my weight on one leg, allowing the other one to rest against my leg like I’m posing that way.

“He has a place of his own in Blue Mountain. It’s about a mile away. My parents are trying to set him up with this girl, Jenni, but he refuses to consider the idea.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Jenni is his best friend’s little sister,” Kaison says. “Ronnie told him Jenni’s off limits.”

“And what do your parents say about that?” I kick my bad heel behind me, putting my weight on the toe of my pump.

“My mom is pretty frustrated. She keeps wanting her kids to get married, and nothing seems to work for her.”

“At least Weston got married,” I point out.

“That’s true. He’s kind of the golden child right now.”

“And what about you?” I ask.

He laughs. “I’m not sure now, but for a long time, they considered me the black sheep of the family.”

I gasp. “Did they actually call you that?”

“No. But I can still tell.”

“Are you sure that’s not a label you’re giving yourself?” I ask gently.

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He shrugs, looking out over the pasture. “I wouldn’t rule out the possibility. But I’ve sown some wild oats, and I know they weren’t too happy about it.”

“Maybe you just had to get your wiggles out for a minute.” That was what Farah always said she was doing before she met her current boyfriend. Just like a kid in elementary school. They need to get their wiggles out before they can settle down and get serious about things. Then they’re good.

Wait a second. Why am I defending Kaison like it’s okay that he’s sowing wild oats? Isn’t that what was so repugnant to me before? Now I’m excusing his behavior? And who’s to say that was what he was doing? For all I know, he’s still planning to wiggle his way over to the next girl and the next, with no serious behavior in sight.

“We should probably head back,” he says. “I have a couple things I want to look up.”

“Okay.” I take a step forward, but I’ve been so wrapped up in the idea of Kaison never finishing up with his wiggles that I’ve forgotten that my heel is broken. With my balance thrown off, I stumble into the air, falling forward, arms flapping like a panicked chicken.

But before I faceplant into a nearby pile of manure the groomsmen have yet to clean, Kaison catches me. “Whoa. Are you okay?” he asks.

I straighten and fight to ignore the fact that his strong arms are around me and that he smells like a grove of pine trees right after a rainstorm. Because I could get used to this, and I don’t want this moment to come back to me at the most random times throughout the day. My heart doesn’t always listen to my head.

I take a step forward, pretending my heel is fine again, but this time Kaison must have been paying attention.

“Hey, what happened to your heel?” he asks.

“Oh, I must have broken it,” I say.

“Is that why you’ve been walking funny this entire time?”

“You noticed that?”

He laughs. “Well, I didn’t know what was going on.”

I feel like such an idiot. “And you kept letting me walk like that? Do you know how uncomfortable it’s been to walk this way?”

“I can imagine. It doesn’t look like something I’d want to do. But then again, wearing heels sounds horrible to begin with. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I’m not a fan, actually.”

“Then don’t wear them unless you feel like you have to.”

It’s a relief to hear him say that.

“I mean, they look great on you. At least, they did before your heel broke. So I’m not complaining or anything. But if you want to wear something more comfortable, then I think you should wear what makes you happy, as long as it’s work appropriate, of course.”

My heart melts, and for a moment, it feels like we’re together. Like he’s my husband,

telling me I don't have to dress up for him if I don't want to. But I know that's not reality, and I have no idea where such nonsense is coming from.

Kaison is a player. As long as I keep reminding myself about that fact, I'll be able to keep from getting my heart smashed.

16

KAISON

My shoulders are killing me from spending too much time in front of the computer for the past three days. I text my mom's favorite massage therapist and arrange for her to come first thing in the morning to work out these kinks in my shoulders. But in the meantime, I'm going to soak in the hot tub.

I change into my swimsuit and throw a towel over my shoulders as I head to the pool area. The hot tub is situated over the pool, and there's a waterfall flowing from it.

When I get there, Ariana is already there by herself, wearing a different swimsuit than what she had on the other night. This one is a red retro one-piece that looks like something Marilyn Monroe would have worn.

"Mind if I join you?" I ask. "My shoulders are killing me, and I could use a soak."

"Sure, come on in." Her voice is strained. Is she uncomfortable with me being here? But I can feel her gaze on me when I'm not looking directly at her. It's like she doesn't want me to see her checking me out, but I can still totally tell she's doing it.

For someone who's rejected me over and over, she sure does seem to be interested tonight. Is her prickly exterior an act, then? Just a front she's putting on to protect herself? That would explain a lot, but at the same time, it makes me sad.

I don't want Ariana to feel that way about me. I've grown to like her as a person these past few days. We have a lot more in common than I thought initially.

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“How’s the writing going?” I drape my towel over a chair near the hot tub.

Her shoulders relax. “A bit better. I got some words flowing last night before bed, and I’m past the part that was giving me trouble.”

“That’s great news. What are you planning to do with the story once it’s finished?” I step into the water and settle across from her.

“I’m shopping it to some agents right now, but I’ve faced a lot of rejection.”

“That’s a long, hard road.”

“You’re telling me,” she says.

“I probably could have gotten an agent if I’d used my real name on the book.” I brush my hands over the top of the water like I’m smoothing out wrinkles from a tablecloth. “But instead, I went online and researched the way to market and write a book so it would appeal to the people looking for crime thrillers. I found a freelance editor, cover designer, and formatter. Then, I hired a marketing team. But I only allowed myself the kind of budget that an average writer would be able to afford. I want this business to support itself without me putting in extra money. I don’t want any of my money giving me an unfair advantage over the other books in my category.”

“That seems like a lot of work,” she says, wrinkling her nose.

“It is. But it’s a lot of fun too.” I cock an eyebrow at her. “Since when were you afraid of hard work, anyway?”

She laughs. “I guess you’ve got me there.”

“I’m not telling you what to do, but there are more options out there than just submitting to agent after agent and constantly getting rejected.”

“But if I don’t have the approval of an agent, how do I know my book is any good?” The concern on her face makes me want to take her in my arms and quiet all her fears.

“You get beta readers.”

“What are those?”

“They read your book after you have it pretty much polished up. They give you feedback before it goes to an editor. If they like it, you have a pretty good idea of how people will receive your book.”

“How do I find beta readers?”

“You join some groups on social media and let them know you’re looking for beta readers.”

“How do I know they won’t just steal my story?”

“Find beta readers that are trusted by other authors. You’d be surprised at how many people aren’t out to steal your story. But if you don’t take a risk, you’ll stay paralyzed and nothing will happen.”

“I don’t know...” There’s so much fear on her face.

“I know it’s scary, but you can do it. Even if you want to keep shopping agents, it

won't hurt to find some extra people to look over your story."

"I guess you're right." She lifts her gaze to mine. "Do you know what groups I can join?"

"I'll email you a list."

Warmth floods her expression, and hope lights her eyes. "Thanks, Kaison. It's really nice of you to help like this. I wasn't expecting anything like that."

"I'm happy to help." And I mean that. The more I'm around Ariana, the deeper my feelings develop. And this isn't just another girl to check off my list. It started with me wanting to win her over to say I could, but now there's been a distinct shift. I want to know her for her. She's different from any other girl I've met before, even the relationship I try to avoid thinking about.

And that's what scares me the most.

17

ARIANA

When Kaison got into the hot tub shirtless, my brain just about went on vacation. And then he started talking about publishing? It's a fascinating subject, to be sure, but those abs! And biceps. Let's not forget his pectorals. How he finds time to get that ripped is beyond me.

My idea of exercise is walking to the fridge to grab a pint of Ben and Jerry's in between writing sessions. Today's walk in the woods was enough to prove to me that I'm not coordinated enough to be a fitness goddess. And of course Kaison had noticed. It wasn't like I could have gotten away with hiding my mishap. Nope, of

course not.

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“Have you considered self publishing before?” he asks, steam rising around us.

“No. I’ve always wanted to prove to myself that I could get picked up by a publisher,” I say.

“It’s just a different way of proving yourself. You let your sales numbers speak for how well received your book is. It’s no different really than impressing an agent. It’s just you have more opportunity to get your book seen, and you don’t have to wait so long to get a response.”

“But an agent is an expert. Those people out there reviewing books are just random nobodies.”

“But ultimately what is your publisher looking for? Think about it. They work for a business, and businesses want to make money. Therefore, they’re looking to sell books. It’s the same thing a self-published author could want. We both want to run profitable businesses. So the agents are looking to represent an author or book that could fly off the shelves. Why not figure that out for yourself and cut out the middle man? Make all the money yourself. I’ve met a bunch of traditional published authors, and you know what? The publisher is taking all their money.”

I frown. “I guess I haven’t thought about it that way. Self-publishing just seemed like giving up. And I’m no quitter.”

“It’s not giving up at all. Do you know how many traditionally published authors have fought to get their rights back so they can self-publish? They know they can make more money themselves. The information on how to do this successfully is out

there. I've found it."

"How did you get so interested in all of this?" I ask.

"I had a friend in Dubai who does this all the time. He taught me the basics and where to go to learn all this stuff, and I went on to learn the rest on my own."

"Weren't you too busy chasing women to do something like this in your spare time?" I ask, half-teasing, half-bitter.

"You'd be surprised at how hard it is to find a date in Dubai," he says. "You're not even allowed to flirt in public."

"That must have been so hard for you," I say.

"It was fine."

I can tell he doesn't want to talk too much about it.

He leans toward me. "That was the old Kaison. I'm starting to realize that I don't really need to look around as much as I thought."

"And why is that?" I ask. His response is completely unexpected.

"Because there's someone who's showing me that there's nothing else better out there for me."

My breath catches. His gaze lingers on my lips, and the air crackles between us. I can feel my face getting hot, and I'm pretty sure it's not just from the hot tub.

"And who is that person?" I whisper.

He scoots closer to me. "I'm pretty sure you know."

My heart pounds in my ears. All the reasons I've tried to push Kaison away evaporate into thin air like the mist rising off this water. All I want this moment is to know what it's like to have his lips on mine, his hands in my hair.

He must have noticed my sudden shift in thought because he leans close to me and pauses, allowing the moment to linger in the air between us. I close the gap, kissing his soft, warm lips, feeling his body against mine.

He responds eagerly, kissing me back with a passion I didn't know he felt for me. It was like he'd been holding all this back for so long and was finally able to let it loose.

I let go of whatever lingering reservations I still hold and lose myself fully in his kiss, the steam swirling around us as our lips test and explore, nip and taste.

Kaison is an expert kisser. I've kept him at arm's length since the moment I've met him, and the more I've resisted, the more I've wanted him, even if I didn't want to admit that to myself. But I've still known. And I've fought it all this time.

He groans beneath my lips and pulls me even closer, like he can't get me close enough. I feel the same way. There's too much distance between us.

Finally, he pulls away, long before I'm ready.

"I'm sorry," he pants.

"Don't be sorry," I whisper. "I kissed you. And I've wanted you to do that for a long time."

"You?" He sounds incredulous. "You've been giving me the cold shoulder all this

time.”

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“That doesn’t mean I didn’t want you. It meant I wanted to keep my job.”

And with those words, reality dawns on me. My job. The project. Staying professional. What am I doing? It’s not like me to tear down my carefully built walls. Those walls protect me from players like Kaison. From getting fired for having an inappropriate relationship with my boss.

“Do you really think you’d lose your job for kissing me?” he asks.

“Is that what this was? A quick kiss? A onetime deal?” Hurt is seeping into my words, and I hate myself for it. What is happening to the strong, independent woman I’ve built myself to be?

“What did you want it to be?” he asks.

“I—” I can’t find the right words. I don’t even know the answer. It’s too much, too complicated. Because my head is telling me one thing, and my heart is begging for something different. But my heart doesn’t know what my brain knows. My brain has logic and knowledge and experience. Kaison can get away with kissing me. It’s not like his dad is going to fire him. If someone finds out about this, I could be gone in a second, no questions asked, no good reference to take on to the next job. Everything I’ve worked so hard to build could be destroyed. I’d have to start all over with a new job search, and who knows how long it would take me to find another gig like this. I have bills to pay. A car payment, insurance, utilities, rent. Stuff Kaison probably hands off to his assistant without a second thought.

“Look,” Kaison says. “I’m not trying to rush you into something you’re not ready for.

But you're important to me. I've never felt this way before. Not even when—" He abruptly stops talking.

"Not even when what?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter." He waves a hand like that's going to make my curiosity just go poof gone.

"You seem like you're full of mysteries," I say.

He shrugs. "Everyone has something."

"I'm a good listener."

His shoulders slump.

I've never seen him like this. Whatever he was about to say was something that had hurt him deeply. It's written all over his face.

"You don't have to tell me if you're not ready, but I promise you can talk to me if you ever feel ready."

Kaison sits still for a moment, the bubbles swirling and popping around him in the steamy water. Finally, he speaks.

"I had my heart broken."

Ariana's eyes are gentle as she sits and listens.

I've never seen such tenderness on her face before. She's always putting on this prickly exterior like she's this amazing superwoman.

I take a deep breath and continue. "I dated this girl all through college." I can't believe I'm telling her about Blair. I glance over at Ariana, but she's still looking at me with that tender expression. "Right before graduation, one of my classes was canceled, and I showed up at her place to surprise her." I swallow. I haven't told this story much, and it's harder than I expect to share it with her. "But she wasn't alone."

Ariana lets out a soft sound of disappointment, and sympathy shines from her eyes.

"My roommate, Grady, was over there. I never got along with the guy. He seemed to hate the fact that my family has money. It's not like I can help the situation I was born into. There was nothing I could do to get that guy to like me. Eventually, I just gave up and ignored him. I thought that would be enough for him, but he got so jealous he had to go and steal my girl."

"But it was her fault too," Ariana points out.

"Oh, believe me, I know," I say, bitterness lacing my words. "Turns out they'd been seeing each other behind my back for weeks, and I had no idea."

"And what did she have to say for herself?" Ariana looks like she wants to tell Blair off.

"She told me I was too focused on school and didn't give her enough attention."

Ariana scoffs. "So she wanted a guy who was a slacker?" She throws her hands up into the air. "To each her own, I guess. But I like a guy who works hard and does his

best.”

This girl is going to be the end of me.

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“I was going to propose to her. I’d already picked out the ring.”

A voice rings out from across the pool area. “And let’s just say he dodged that bullet.”

I look over to see Mom hobbling over on crutches. I get out of the hot tub immediately and grab a towel, rushing to her side. “Mom, what are you doing, moving around like that?”

“I got bored. There’s nothing good to watch on tv, and my phone needs to charge. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Read a book?” I suggest.

“This is much more interesting. What are you two doing out here in the hot tub, anyway? This doesn’t look like much of a work meeting.”

It looks like we’ve been busted. At least she didn’t come in a few minutes ago. It could have been a lot worse. But still, it’s not great that Mom’s seeing us together like this. Beyond the fact that it looks unprofessional, I don’t need Mom getting any ideas about matching us up. She’ll never let me live this down, and it’ll be all I hear about for who knows how long.

“We actually just kind of bumped into each other in here,” I say. Technically, it’s the truth. We hadn’t planned to go in the hot tub together. But being this close to Ariana has been too much to bear.

“That would explain why I couldn’t find either one of you.”

I lead her over to one of our cushioned patio chairs and drag over another chair and a couple of throw pillows to prop her leg up with. “There,” I say when she’s all situated. “How’s that?”

“I’m fine.” She waves me away. “Now tell me. When are the two of you getting together, after all?”

I nearly choke. “Mom, we can’t get together. It wouldn’t be professional.” I keep my voice low because I don’t want to hurt Ariana’s feelings. She’s still sitting in the hot tub with her back to us, scrolling through her phone. But then she gets up and towels off.

“I’m going to head to my room. You guys have a good night,” she says.

We wave goodbye to her and then return to our conversation.

“I don’t see anything wrong with it. Look at Weston and Callie. It all worked out for them.”

“They got lucky. Who’s to say we’d be lucky like that?” But who am I kidding? I’m getting involved with Ariana, whether I like it or not. My heart has already decided that for me.

“You’re telling her about picking out a ring for that low-class ex-girlfriend of yours, and you’re saying you have to keep things professional? Haven’t you already crossed that line?”

She has a point. Not that I’m going to tell her that and add fuel to her fire.

“Even if we weren’t coworkers, Ariana wouldn’t want to be with me. She’s made that perfectly clear.”

“Why ever not?” Mom says it like she thinks Ariana is out of her mind from not already falling head over heels for me.

“She thinks I’m a player.”

“Well, honey, that’s just because you were trying to sort your feelings out. There’s nothing wrong with taking some time to date around a bunch.”

“That’s not how you and Dad made it sound at the time. As I recall, you sent me over to Dubai to reform.”

“We needed you to handle our office over there.”

But we both know the truth. I was in so much pain and wasn’t making the best choices. I’m not proud of everything I’ve done in my past. I wasn’t perfect by any stretch. I’m still not. But I’m not a heartless jerk either. I was so loyal to my ex. I never even flirted with anyone while I was with her all four years of college.

That’s what Ariana doesn’t see about me. She’s painted me as this scoundrel in her mind, but that’s not who I am at the core.

And I don’t know how to prove that to her.

* * *

Ariana and I get started early the next morning. After working for a couple of hours, I glance at the coffee maker and say, “Do you want to go into town and grab a cup of coffee and some muffins or something?”

“Sure.” She grabs her purse. “Want to drive over there together? We can take my car.”

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“Or we can take my dad’s Lamborghini.” I wiggle my eyebrows at her.

“You look ridiculous when you do that, you know.” She laughs.

“So whatdaya say? Should we ride in your very lovely Honda or take the Lamborghini?”

“Won’t your dad mind if you drive it?”

“Not at all. He lets me drive it all the time.”

“Really?” she asks.

“No. But he doesn’t have to know.”

“Doesn’t he have cameras up everywhere?”

“Yes, but he won’t say anything as long as we don’t drive into a pole or something. And it’s just down to the coffee shop. It’s not like we’re joyriding drunk at three in the morning.”

“Fair enough. But I hope you don’t get me fired over this.”

“I’ll cover for you. I’ll just tell him I thought it was the company car,” I say.

There’s a crashing sound, and Mittens and Zebra come bounding down the hall, chasing after each other. They end up wrestling each other like one giant ball of furry

cuteness.

Ariana sneezes. “When is that doctor coming by again?”

“Oh, I think we forgot to call him. Do you still want an allergy shot?” I ask.

“I’d better get one.”

We head out into the garage, and I open her door for her when we get to the Lamborghini. “Are you sure about this?” she asks. “I really don’t want to get in trouble with your dad.”

“He’s too busy with saving the company to notice whether I’ve taken his sports car out for an hour.”

“Okay,” she says reluctantly, climbing into the low seat and folding herself into the car.

I grab the key from the digitized lockbox where he keeps all the keys to his cars and get behind the wheel.

“You have the code to his safe thingy for his car keys?” she asks.

“I’ve had it for years. I watched him put it in when I was sixteen, and he still hasn’t changed it after all these years. Even when he got a new lockbox. He just put the same code in again.”

“I guess he’s not super concerned that anyone is going to get into his safe.”

“For the most part, the staff around here have been with the family for a long time or they come highly recommended.” I back out through the already-opened garage door,

and before long, we're zooming down the long driveway and toward town. I don't know if it's the power of the car as I'm driving or the beautiful girl sitting next to me, but I'm feeling the biggest rush right now. I glance over and the blissful expression on Ariana's face makes me think she's feeling the same way.

"Have you driven this thing before?" she asks.

"A few times. I've never been able to get used to it."

"It's an incredible experience for sure."

Just as we're turning into the parking lot for Blue Mountain Brewery, something sharp digs into my ankle, and I yelp.

"What was that?" I look down to see one of the kittens curled up at my feet, attacking my ankles. I reach down and grab her. "What are you doing here, little one?"

Ariana giggles and then sneezes. "She must have snuck in here when we were getting in. I can't believe we drove all the way here without her revealing herself." She sneezes again.

I tuck the little gray striped fluffball into my shirt, and she pokes her head out of my collar. "I'm not so sure she's going to behave herself in here."

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“I would tuck her into my purse, but I’m allergic and I can’t have cat hair all over everything.”

I open the door to the coffee shop, and the kitten travels down my torso, sinking her claws into my side. “Arrgh!” I yell, twisting this way and that.

“Hold on!” Ariana says. “Let me get her.” She untucks the bottom of my shirt, and the kitten digs her claws in deeper, clearly unhappy with Ariana’s attempt to draw her out.

I yowl as the kitten gets me particularly good, and then Ariana cheers in triumph.

“Got her!”

But our triumph is short lived. I may not be getting scratched up by a kitten anymore, but now I have the eyes of the entire Blue Mountain knitting club all focused in on me. They’ve all just witnessed my interaction with Ariana and how she just had her hands up my shirt.

I feel my cheeks going bright red. Normally, my mom would be here with these ladies, if it weren’t for her knee injury. So these are all her very best friends.

And we’ve just given them plenty to talk about.

There's a table of knitting grannies staring at me right now, and my hands were just feeling up Kaison's torso in a huge way. I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that they know who he is. I'm getting that impression from the way they're looking at us.

I've just become another one of his girls. And now the entire town will hear about it. I carefully hand Mittens back to him, but not before she claws my hands. The little puncture wounds are already starting to swell up.

Kaison looks down at me. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "Let's just get some coffee."

We walk over to the counter with Mittens perched on his shoulder. I order my coffee black, and he gets his full of all kinds of creamer and sweeteners. It's too complicated to keep track of what they're doing to his, but I don't like my coffee to taste creamy like that. It's gross to me. Farah can never understand that because I'm such a huge fan of ice cream, but that's something completely different. Ice cream is ice cream, and coffee is coffee.

When we've gotten our coffee and muffins, we settle over to a table, Mittens purring and curled up in Kaison's lap. We're there for about two minutes when one of the grannies shows up. This one is wearing an orange floral dress that hangs loosely around her...abundant figure. Her gray hair is permed and teased up into a halo around her head. "Kaison Keith? Where have you been? I haven't seen you in ages."

"Hello, Mrs. Angelo. I've been in Dubai, actually. I just arrived home."

"Dubai? I don't think I even know where that is. Is that in South Carolina?"

Kaison hides a grin. "No, ma'am. It's a bit farther away than that."

She waves a hand dismissively. "I'm not very good at geography, so you'll have to cut me a break."

Her gaze lands on me, and she inspects me like a piece of produce at the grocery store. "And who is this lovely young lady?"

"This is Ariana. She and I are working on a project together."

"You were working on something over there in the doorway when you first came in," she says out the side of her mouth.

He clears his throat. "Well, um, yes."

"So you're in town to see your mom? It's a shame that she was in that car accident. That drunk who hit her belongs behind bars. I can't believe he got behind the wheel in that condition. But who am I kidding? It wouldn't be the first time." She takes a breath and then starts right back into her tirade. When she's finished, she says, "How is your mom, by the way?"

"She's not staying off her feet as much as she should," he rattles.

"That sounds like her." Mrs. Angelo chuckles.

Two other ladies come up to us. "Sorry to bother you two lovebirds, but we want to know how your mother is doing," a woman in a blue striped dress asks. She glances over at me.

"Oh, dear. Where are my manners? I haven't introduced myself to you." She has white wavy hair and glasses. "My name is Joyce Gregory." She turns to the woman beside her. "And this is Maybelline Richardson."

Her companion has a headful of orange curls that clearly aren't natural. Maybe she's going for the Shirley Temple look? Either way, the ladies look sweet as can be, and it's nice that they're so concerned about their friend. Kaison's mom must be very well loved in Blue Mountain.

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Before Kaison can give them the update, Joyce looks down at Mittens, who is still curled up in his lap.

“Well, who is this cutie?”

“This is Mittens,” I say. “She’s our little stowaway.”

Kaison laughs. “We had no idea she was in the car until we got here.”

Kaison fills them in on how his mom is doing, being sure to let them know she was sneaking out of bed and getting on her feet more than she should.

“That sounds like her, ignoring the doctor’s advice and trying to overdo it,” Joyce says.

“Well, don’t tell her I’ve told on her,” Kaison says.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” Maybelline says.

Somehow, I’m not sure I believe her.

“Speaking of doctors, your sweetheart looks like she needs to see one.”

“What do you mean?” Kaison says, looking over at me.

“Take a look at her hand,” Joyce says. “I was a nurse for thirty-five years. You look like you’re having quite the allergic reaction.”

Kaison looks over at me. “Oh, no. That’s gotten pretty bad.”

I try to bend my fingers, but they’re so stiff and swollen it’s hard to do.

“Maybe you’d better go swing by Dr. Bradley’s office.”

“We were actually going to have him come to the house to give her an allergy shot,” Kaison says. “But we got busy and never called him.”

“Well, I’d say you’d better make that a top priority today,” Joyce says.

“Thank you, both of you. As soon as we finish this coffee, we’ll have to head in that direction.” There’s no way I’m taking coffee into a Lamborghini that belongs to the CEO of Keith Enterprises. It’s bad enough that we had a little stowaway. Hopefully, Mittens didn’t scratch up any of the leather.

We finish up our coffee, and just as we’re heading out the door, Kaison gets a phone call.

“It’s my dad.” He puts it on speaker and opens my door for me.

“Hey, Pops. How’s it going?”

“Kaison, why is my Lamborghini sitting in front of Blue Mountain Brewery?”

My heart is pounding so hard it’s about to leap out of my chest. This is it. My job is toast.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Kaison smoothly says.

“Very funny. After I drove by, I checked the footage on the security cameras and saw

you and Ariana getting into the car.”

I knew I shouldn’t have let him talk me into getting into that car.

“I thought you were out of town,” Kaison says as we climb into the car.

“I just arrived today. Please return my car and don’t leave your trash in it like you did last time. You know I don’t like it when you take my car without asking.”

“Hey, someone needs to drive it around town once in a while. It’s not good to just let your car sit for too long.”

“Oh, I see. You were just doing me a favor. Getting to the chores I don’t have time for.”

Who knew Mr. Keith was so snarky and sarcastic?

“Exactly. You’ll thank me later when your car is running well.”

“Listen, I’m at the house right now, but it looks like Brensen and I are going to have to fly out to Singapore tonight. There’ve been some complications with our office over there that I need to sort out ASAP. Are you willing to extend your stay at the house? I need someone to be there for your mom. She’s getting so stir crazy she’s about to start driving around town to visit all her friends, and I need her to stay put so she can recover.”

“We actually just bumped into her entire knitting circle,” Kaison says as he cranks up the engine. “Why don’t we have them come over for a visit to help her out?” he suggests.

“Are you about to drive my car while you’re on the phone?” Mr. Keith grouches.

“No, sir. I would never. I’m about to hang up right now.”

“You’d better. I’ll see you at the house before I leave.”

“Actually, we need to take Ariana to the doctor. Her hand is all swollen up.”

“What happened to her hand?” his dad asks.

“Mittens scratched her, and she’s allergic.”

“Why don’t you get the doctor to meet you at the house? I don’t want you gallivanting all over town in my Lamborghini.”

Good thing he didn’t know we had Mittens on the road with us. Somehow, we were going to have to drive home without the kitty scratching up the seats.

“You got it, Pops. I’ll call Dr. Bradley as soon as I hang up with you.”

“See you soon.”

We sit in the parking lot with Mittens purring at Kaison’s feet as he calls the doctor. Luckily, Dr. Bradley agrees to come out to the house to treat me right away.

As we drive back to the house, I look over to Kaison, who steps on the gas pedal so hard it throws me back into my seat and my heart ends up in my throat. If he doesn’t watch it, I’m going to have to be treated for a heart attack as well as the allergic reaction.

But despite all that, there’s something fun about this. I’ve never been one to sneak out or rebel, but I have to admit that going on this adventure with Kaison is making me rethink my cautious attitude toward life.

Maybe it’s time for me to start living a little.

20

KAISON

I drive back to the house. I can’t help but worry about Ariana’s hand. What if it gets worse and her throat closes up before the doctor can get back? “Do you have an EpiPen or allergy medicine with you?”

“No. I didn’t know you guys would have cats.”

“I’ll check my mom’s medicine cabinet. I’m sure Dr. Bradley will have something he can prescribe you, but you need something now.”

“It’s just a little allergies. It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before,” Ariana says.

“No one in my family deals with allergies, so I don’t know how it works. I just hear horror stories about people dying from allergic reactions.”

I can’t lose Ariana. She’s smart and funny and beautiful, and I think I’m starting to fall hard for her.

I pull right up to the front door, and we go inside, Mittens tucked under my arm. “Let’s get you to the kitchen,” I say.

Mom is sitting on the couch in the formal living room. “What’s going on, Kaison?” Concern covers her features.

Mittens jumps from my hands when she sees my mom. I guess she’s already picked favorites around here.

“Mittens scratched up Ariana and now her hand is swelling. Do you know if we have any antihistamines?” I ask.

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“Did you call the doctor?” Mom asks.

“He’s on his way right now.”

“Why don’t you wait until he shows up and then you can ask him what to do?”

“He said I can take some Benadryl when we called him,” Ariana says.

“He did?” I ask.

“Yes, didn’t you hear him?”

I run a hand through my hair. “I guess I was so worried I missed that part.”

Mom gives me a knowing smile, and I can tell she’s up to no good. “It’s sweet that you care so much about yourcoworker.”

I don’t like the way she’s emphasizing that word. But it’s true, isn’t it? I care a lot about Ariana, and it’s taken her having an allergic reaction to that stinker of a kitten for me to realize how deeply I feel about her. I can’t lose her.

We get some Benadryl in Ariana, and I’m hovering over her like a helicopter parent.

“Kaison, I promise I’m fine.”

Dr. Bradley shows up a few minutes later and checks out her hand. He’s an older doctor with a bald head and a belly that hangs over his belt, probably from eating too

many of his wife's frosted sugar cookies. She always sends some over during the holidays. "Have you washed this with soap and water?"

"Yes, I did right before I took the medicine."

"For future reference, it would have been better if you'd done it right after the incident occurred, but you should be fine."

"Can she get the allergy shot now so she doesn't have this happen again?" I ask.

"Unfortunately, no. The shot has a tiny amount of the allergen, so you wouldn't want to introduce more of it. That's more of a long-term thing. Your best bet is to steer clear of the cats and take Benadryl as needed. Are you planning to stay here for much longer?" he asks.

She looks over at me.

"A few days longer," I say.

"You should be fine. Just take precautions and don't allow the cats near your bedding."

"Could this have been fatal?" I ask.

"It could be if she has a history of asthma, but most cat allergies aren't the same as a peanut allergy or something."

"I don't have asthma," she says, shaking her head.

Dr. Bradley finishes up with us and just as he's leaving, a familiar car pulls up, something I haven't seen in years. It's a red Mercedes Cabriolet with a license plate

that says 2CUTE4U.

The driver's side car door opens, and a blonde head appears, the nearly white hair pulled back into a high, sleek ponytail that drapes down her shoulder and hangs to her waist. She pulls off a pair of designer sunglasses that likely cost as much as an economy car and parts her lips. They look different from the last time I've seen her. More plump or something, like she's gotten lip injections. And her eyelashes look like one of those filters you see on social media. Ridiculously long and thick. Nothing like the natural lashes she had back when we were in college.

"Kaison, it's good to see you again, babe."

Ariana clamps her mouth shut and keeps her face in an emotionless mask. But beneath that mask, I can sense a fury bottled up that's beginning to simmer.

Blair saunters up to the front door. "Well, aren't you going to invite me in?" She holds her keys out for Ariana to take, like she's one of the household staff members or a personal assistant and she wants her to go valet park her car.

Ariana doesn't take her keys. She crosses her arms instead. "Sorry, sweetheart. Not in my job description."

"Oh, my mistake." But she doesn't look sorry at all, and I suspect that she's perfectly aware that Ariana's relationship to me is a bit more than that of a household staff member. Otherwise, Ariana wouldn't have asked me who she was, and Blair was close enough to have heard the exchange.

Ariana keeps her tone cool. "Don't worry about it."

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“And what is your job description?” She perches her sunglasses on her head. Her black coat looks like it’s made of ostrich feathers, and most likely the original price tag could probably feed a third-world country for a good while.

“She’s working with me to revamp the financial department for Keith Enterprises.”

“Oh, neat,” she says in a bored tone.

“What can I help you with, Blair?” I ask.

She looks around. “Is there someplace we can talk?” She glances over at Ariana. “Alone?”

“There’s no need to send Ariana away. She can hear whatever it is you have to say.”

Blair looks between us, and her oversized pouty lips drop into a frown.

“But I really don’t need to,” Ariana says, her voice controlled and steady. Too steady. It’s like her armor is back in place, and I want nothing more than to tear it down again. “I’ll just let you two catch up.”

The situation feels like it’s downward spiraling, and I don’t know how to get control of things. It’s like all the work I’ve done to get Ariana to trust me vanished the moment that red convertible pulled up.

“If you need anything, I’ll be in the conference room, putting the finishing touches on the program.”

I want to stop her or at the very least follow her, but I have to get rid of Blair before any more damage is done. “We can talk in the family room.”

I can’t take her to the formal living room because Mom is sitting in there, probably listening to every word we’re saying, dying to soak up every juicy detail.

The family room is in the basement, and that should be private enough that I don’t get any prying eyes misunderstanding the situation.

Blair seems all too happy to follow me down there. What does she want with me, anyway? I settle down on the couch, and she tries to scoot right next to me. I put a pillow between us and scoot down a bit.

“What’s going on, Blair?”

She bats her fake lashes at me and drags her long nails down my arm. “I’ve missed you, this place.”

“You’ve only been here a couple of times.”

“I know I messed up. I was stupid, Kaison. I know that now.”

“It’s in the past,” I say.

Her eyes light up, but I stop her before she gets any ideas in her head.

“That being said, I’m not looking for anything with you right now.” It’s best to set that boundary right away. I’m not into leading girls on.

“We don’t have to pick up where we left off. I’m okay with just being friends and seeing where that leads.”

I shake my head. She's not getting the hint. "I've fallen for someone else, Blair. You've knocked on the wrong door today." I pause for a moment. "How'd you know I was here, anyway?"

"Your mom posted about it on social media. She said you were watching over her while she was recovering from knee surgery."

Of course she did. I sigh and clamp my mouth shut to keep from saying the words on the tip of my tongue. I stand. "Well, if that's it, I think we should wrap this up. I've got a lot of work to do today."

"Wait." She puts her hand on my arm. "Is there any way you can help me out with something?" She gives me this pleading look that used to melt my heart, but those days are long gone.

"What is it?" I'm not in the mood to help her out, but I can't help but be curious about what she's about to say.

"I'm in some trouble financially."

Right. It definitely looks that way.

"Okay."

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“I was wondering if you could help me out.”

“How much are you talking?”

“Like, fifty thousand, give or take.” She keeps her voice light like this is no big ask.

“What are you doing for work these days?”

“Oh, um. I’m into real estate.”

I’d see if I could get her a job at the company, but I don’t want this woman in my life. I don’t mind helping out an old friend, but I’m getting the impression she’s not in the mood to work for the money.

“And it’s not going so well for you?” I ask.

“Oh, well, it’s going okay.” She waves a hand. “But life gets expensive. You know how it is.”

“Did you realize I was planning to propose to you before you picked my roommate over me?” I say.

“You were?” She genuinely looks surprised.

“Yes. And everything I have would have been yours, too. But you decided you wanted to take your life in another direction.”

“I made a mistake, Kaison. Can’t you let go of the past?”

“I can. But I’ve also learned from it too.” I stand. “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“So you’re not willing to help me out?”

“I would think that answer was obvious to you,” I say.

“What about twenty-five?”

I can’t believe she’s still trying to milk me for money.

“I don’t think so. But I do know some older guys in Dubai that might be willing to help you out.”

“Really?”

“That was supposed to be a joke,” I say. Although, the guys I’m thinking of probably would take it seriously. She looks like their type.

“Just give it some thought.” She smiles at me and tosses that silky, most likely fake ponytail over her shoulder. “I’ll be in touch.”

I walk her to the door, and I open it for her. “See you later,” I tell her.

She blows me a kiss and waves as she gets in her car, and I make a mental note to block her number and to notify the security guard not to let her in next time. Who knows how she’s sweet-talked him into letting her onto the property?

I turn to see Ariana staring out the conference room window at us. She doesn’t look happy either.

ARIANA

I'm such an idiot for letting Kaison into my heart. I'd allowed myself to become vulnerable. I'd kissed him in the stupid hot tub, for Pete's sake, which is totally unlike me.

I don't give my kisses away easily. They mean something to me. I've been falling steadily for Kaison ever since I've met him, against my better judgement. But my silly heart thought it knew better.

And now I've made a complete fool of myself. People in this town think I'm dating Kaison, and it's probably going to end up getting spread across the internet once the paparazzi pick up on the story.

I've just discredited myself as a professional. This kind of gossip follows you on the internet. Potential employers google your name these days. I don't want the reputation of the girl who dates around the office. How can I work with Kaison now that I've let him into my heart? Knowing that he's likely starting something with his ex again?

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Kaison comes into the room and meets my gaze. I must have a stormy look on my face because there's fear in his eyes.

"How's the programming coming?"

I return to face the laptop screen. "I'm almost finished. Next comes the testing phase."

The air hangs between us, filled with tension and unspoken explanations.

The truth is, I don't need him to explain anything. I don't want to hear whatever bogus excuse he's likely to give me. I saw the way Blair was flirting with him on her way out. For all I know, he kissed her during their little chat.

The thought boils my blood. I only have myself to blame because I knew better. The best thing to do at this point is to go back to keeping my distance from Kaison emotionally. I still have to work with him, so it's not like I can take off. Besides, I've worked hard to land this job, and I'm not going to let some fling ruin it for me. The feelings I've allowed to develop between Kaison and me will have to be compartmentalized into their own little time-out corner. They've been naughty, and so that's where they belong.

"Are you okay?" Kaison asks.

"I'm fine." I type away at my laptop.

"You don't look fine. You look like you want to strangle someone."

I smooth the anger from my face. “Oh, sorry about that.” Taking my anger out on Kaison isn’t professional either. The anger will have to join the other naughty feelings I have in the time-out corner.

He puts a hand on my arm. “Is there something you’d like to talk about?”

“Nope.” I pop the P. Too much? I groan inwardly and try to focus on the work in front of me.

“Okay.” His tone is light, but there’s an undertone of tension in the word. “You don’t want to ask me how it went?”

“It’s really none of my business.” I don’t even bother to look over at him. There’s too much chance of my walls crumbling if I do.

“Nothing happened between us.”

I don’t believe him. Clearly, he hasn’t lost his player ways, having random girls stop by the house to see him. Everything that’s been between us has been a game, and I’m nothing more to him than another one of his conquests. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why does he have to look so hot right now? It’s the most unfair thing ever.

“Let’s just focus on the project. We only have a week left to get this done, and I still need to work out the bugs.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.” I hear him sorting through some of the files.

I breathe a sigh of relief. It seems like he’s finally going to let it go. Even if he’s telling the truth and nothing happened with him and this girl, it still means that there are girls showing up to see him. That’s not going to stop anytime soon. Do I want to be with a guy who has that going on?

I'm not even sure I'm ready for a relationship. I've spent so much time on my career. Do I want to throw all that away? Because that's what I'd be doing. I've already put my job at risk by allowing myself to be caught up in the moment with a nice set of abs and some bulging biceps.

I wipe that image from my mind because now that I've pictured them, I want to allow the picture of Kaison shirtless in the hot tub to linger in my mind. But I can't let myself think that way anymore.

Truthfully, I've seen him that way, and it's much harder to resist him when I know what it's like to kiss him, to feel his arms around me and his lips on mine. And even more beautiful than his face and his body—if that's even possible—is his mind. Talking to him about this project or—even better—publishing books is where Kaison has truly pulled me in.

That means I probably shouldn't talk books with Kaison anymore. Not if it's making me weak like it has in the past. That weakness is the enemy here.

And I need to be strong. Just like I've always been.

22

KAISON

Ariana has completely put me in the “boss zone.” I'm not even good enough for the friend zone at this point. She hardly speaks to me beyond work stuff, and I haven't figured out how to get her to warm up to me again. While it may be chilly outside these days, I don't want it chilly in our office space too. And lately, it's been downright frigid.

Maybe it's for the best. Seeing Blair again was a reminder that relationships only end

in pain for me. It's why I haven't settled down yet. With Ariana in my life now, I've been contemplating a long term relationship or maybe even something that might result in the grandbabies my mom wants so badly.

Mom seems to be doing better, but she's still dealing with some pain. It's worked out better than expected to have a temporary office here at the house. We've been able to focus better than at the Atlanta headquarters because of all the hustle and bustle that goes on there.

I've been utilizing my assistant, Corey, who's stayed behind, and he's flown out to see us and bring us documents from time to time. But most of what we've needed to do has been taken care of digitally.

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Dad has been gone to Singapore for the last week, and Mom has been lonelier than ever. She and Ariana have seemed to get along great, and to help Mom out, she reached out to the Blue Mountain knitting group to have them hold their next meeting here at the house.

After I finish my breakfast, the doorbell begins to ring, and the grannies start to arrive. I can see now why Mom wants grandkids so badly. All these women talk about are what their grandkids are doing. A couple of them even have great grandkids.

At least Mom has Angel, thanks to Weston marrying Callie. She spoils that baby rotten and shows her off at every possible moment.

“Well, hello there, Mr. Kaison,” Maybelline says to me. Her red hair is wet from the rain we’ve been having, but that hasn’t stopped her wild curls. They’re still going strong.

“Hi, Maybelline. I can’t tell you how happy I am that you could make it. My mom needs something to distract her from how stir crazy she’s been feeling.”

“What are friends for, anyway?” Maybelline says. She winks at me. “I’m never one to turn down an invite to this ritzy place.” She looks over at the Christmas tree we’ve already set up. “It looks like you’ve got your tree up early.”

“We figured it might cheer Mom up. I even got the staff to decorate it like a tree from the 1800s. That little antique shop on Main Street had these old fashioned ornaments that Mom has been going on and on about. I surprised her with them.”

“Oh wow. That’s very thoughtful of you. I know the menfolk in my family never would have thought of something like that.”

“I can’t take all the credit. Ariana was the one who told me she wanted them.”

Ariana looks up when I speak her name, and when she hears what I’m saying, a warm smile lights up her face. It is sweet to see how much she seems to care for my mom. And it isn’t like she’s doing it to schmooze the boss’s wife. It’s clear Ariana deeply cares about my mom and her well-being and happiness. It only makes me want her more because I’m a Momma’s boy at heart, and I can’t help but melt when I see someone being good to her.

But it’s complicated too. Seeing Blair come back has shaken me and reminded me that relationships are scary. If Ariana ever decides to let me out of the boss zone, I plan to take things a bit more slowly. But who knows if she’ll ever let me back into her good graces?

Maybelline looks over at Ariana. “Oh, that sweet girl. How very thoughtful of her. You’ve really picked yourself a good one this time, Kaison. Not like that other girl who couldn’t keep her hands off another man.”

How can I make this woman stop talking about this? Ariana’s focus in on us, and I have to think fast. “Do you have your tree up yet?”

“Oh no. My husband told me I’m not allowed to put it up until after Thanksgiving. But mine is just a regular one. Not all fancy like the one you have.”

“Don’t let her fool you. Her tree is full of handmade ornaments from when her kids were little. And now her grandchildren are adding to it,” Mom said. “I say that’s the best kind of tree to have. But I do like the one you guys put together for me this year. One day, I’ll have one with the grandkids ornaments on it.” She looks at me and

raises her eyebrows. “You’d better take note of that, Kaison. It’s time for you to do your duty and find yourself a wife. No more of this playing around you seem to be doing here lately.”

“Playing around?” Mrs. Angelo says. “I thought he had himself a girlfriend finally.”

“Maybe we should see if Lidia can bring out some cookies or something,” I say, hoping the mention of food would be enough distraction for them to stop talking about my pitiful lack of a love life.

A grateful look crosses Ariana’s features, and I get the impression that she wasn’t excited about the conversation either.

But my attempt at creating a diversion wasn’t very successful because Mom says, “Kaison and Ariana aren’t dating. They’re just coworkers. But you never know when that might change.” She wiggles her eyebrows and gets a few hoots and hollers from the knitting group.

“Sounds like the romance novel I just finished,” Mrs. Angelo says. “You’ll have to let me know how this one turns out.”

“Oh,” Mom says. “You’ll hear every detail. They’ve kind of backed off each other here lately, but a week or so ago you should have seen them. Getting all cozy in the hot tub.”

“How scandalous!” Mrs. Angelo doesn’t look offended, though. She looks delighted, like her favorite book characters are finally getting their happily ever after.

But my life isn’t like a romance novel. There’s nothing happening. Not very novel-worthy. I could go back to my old life of chasing tail at the club, but somehow it’s lost its appeal for me. It doesn’t matter that Ariana has put her walls back up. I’ve

tasted a little of what life with her might be like, and I'm hooked. This is the most pitiful and rejected I've been since Blair left me. It's not as bad as it could be because there's no Grady around, but I've fallen and I can't go back to where I was before. It's too late for that.

Okay, so maybe it's a little like a romance novel, but our story may never have a happy ending. It takes two people to say yes to have a future together, and right now Ariana is saying no. Not directly with her words, but she's rejecting me with her actions. And her lack of actions. And that's driving me up the wall.

I want her in my life. I crave her arms around me and her lips on mine.

This woman has captured my heart, and I'm not even sorry about it. That's not to say that I'm not worried about how easy it will be for her to stomp on my feelings. It could be a lot worse. She could be rude or after my money, like Blair. Somehow, that makes her rejection sting a bit more. Because she's no diva. She's selfless and kind and caring. And extremely smart and hardworking. Pretty much perfect for me.

As scary as it is, I'm finding myself falling. And I might be doing it all on my own.

23

ARIANA

Around four, Kaison turns to me. "Hey, you want to go horseback riding?"

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“Right now? We’re not even done for the day.”

“Let’s end early. We’re ahead of schedule.” He folds his laptop shut.

“You’re serious about this,” I say.

“Do you know how to ride a horse?” he asks.

“I’ve never tried it.”

“What?” He grins. “This will be fun, then.”

“I don’t think I like the way you’re smiling right now,” I say.

He waves my concern away. “No, you’ll do great.”

“I think you’re forgetting the walk we took when I ended up hobbling around in the gravel like the earth’s biggest fool.”

“This time, we’ll make sure you’re dressed in the proper attire. Did you bring any jeans?”

“Yeah.” I even had a flannel shirt. I’d seen it in the little boutique in town, and I couldn’t resist it. Farah would be proud of me. But I figured Christmas time was coming up, and it would be fun to have something festive. This shirt was a red-and-black plaid and didn’t have to be worn just around Christmas. It could be worn anytime. Maybe I’d put my hair in braids and complete the cowgirl look. It’s not

really my normal look, but it could be fun. Who am I anyway?

But ever since that bimbo showed up here, I've been putting more time in my outfits each day. It's stupid and petty, but I can't help myself. There's a part of me that wants Kaison to want me like he wants her. It's stupid of me because I'm not going to allow anything romantic to pass between us. But somehow, I still care.

So I've been doing small things, like I went and got my nails done with Kaison's mom when she had her nail tech stop by the house. She insisted I take a turn too, and how could I say no? So my fingernails and toes are bright red now.

The longer I've been in Blue Mountain, the less pressured I feel to measure up and be perfect. For one thing, I'm not surrounded by a bunch of men constantly demeaning me or belittling me in various passive-aggressive ways. Kaison isn't like that. He treats me with kindness and respect, like I'm his equal.

Although I haven't dropped the wall surrounding my heart, I've dropped the walls I've put up to protect me against the sexist workplace I've gotten used to over the years.

Because I feel safe in the Keith home. Especially with Mama Keith watching over everything. She wouldn't put up with anyone disrespecting me. And no one would dare cross her.

It's been years since I've had a family situation. I have Farah, but her parents aren't the warm, homey type. Her dad is the kind who expects everything to be done perfectly. He's a little intense. Farah had to put up with a lot. I've never felt completely at home there.

But the Keiths treat me like I'm one of their own. I get the impression that Kaison's mom still hopes that we'll end up getting together. But how could we when he has

random girls showing up at the house? Who's next? A busty redhead? And no, I don't mean Maybelline.

I wouldn't be surprised if she had a little crush on Kaison, but she's not really the type he'd go for.

That blonde that showed up didn't look anything like me. How could he go from someone like her to someone like me? I'm a confident girl, don't get me wrong. But I don't exactly seem to be his type. The made-over girl in the club, maybe. But that's not me. I'm the mousy girl with the boxy suits, sensible shoes, and oversized glasses with a conservative bun. I'm bookish and nerdy.

It's rare that I have nail polish on, even though I do like it. I've caught myself admiring my nails multiple times throughout the day, and I even wore some open-toed shoes Callie told me she didn't want anymore because I wanted to peek at my newly painted toenails too.

I meet Kaison just outside the mudroom door that leads to the trail to the stables.

"Well, don't you look the part," he says after taking in my cowgirl getup.

We head to the stables, and the cowgirl boots I found in the mudroom that Kaison's mom told me I could borrow crunch over the gravel. "I've learned my lesson. I'm dressing properly this time. No more getting attacked by nature because of wardrobe malfunctions."

Kaison laughs. "Don't underestimate nature. It can still attack when you least suspect."

"Well, those were ominous words," I say, sticking out my tongue. "I prefer to look on the bright side of things, Negative Nicholas."

“Isn’t it supposed to be Negative Nancy?”

“Yeah, but you’re a boy and stuff, so I decided to switch it up.”

We get to the stables, and Kaison leads me inside. Langston and a girl with dark features are in the stables together.

“Hey, what are you guys doing here?” Kaison asks.

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“We’re talking horses. Jenni thinks she can beat Thunder this year at the race with Kingpin, but Thunder has won three years in a row, and I think that speaks for itself.”

“Just wait until the vet clears Marshmallow for racing again. Thunder will be eating his dust,” Jenni says.

Kaison smiles. “Well, good luck with that. Langston takes his horse racing very seriously.”

“Oh, I know,” Jenni says. She looks over at me. “Have we met?”

“I don’t think so. I’m Ariana. I’m staying with the Keiths while Kaison and I are working on a project together.”

“Oh, nice to meet you.” Her smile is warm and genuine, and I like her immediately. There seems to be something going on between her and Langston, and now I’m starting to feel like I should join the Blue Mountain knitting club because I’m just as bad as the rest of them with the matchmaking thing. It’s a little contagious. And I can’t help but feel sorry for Mrs. Keith that she doesn’t have all the grandbabies that she wants so badly.

“Are you two going riding?” Jenni asks.

“Yeah. It’s my first time.”

Her eyes light up. “Really?” She walks down a few stalls and stops beside a beautiful gray horse. “You should ride Smokie. She’s really sweet and gentle.”

“You seem to know what you’re talking about, so I think I’ll take your advice.”

She smiles back at me, and her eyes crinkle at the corners.

“She’s a pro,” Langston says. “You’d better remember this moment because you’ll never hear me saying it to the competition again.”

She elbows him. “You’re just gearing up to be a sore loser.”

He grins, and a set of dimples appears. “In your dreams.”

“Oh, do you feel threatened?” she asks, putting a hand on her hip.

His already huge smile widens even more. “Nope. Not a bit.”

Well, those two don’t have any chemistry between them at all. I’m going to need a fan because it’s getting heated in here.

Langston and Kaison and Jenni work together to get our horses saddled up. “Give me something to do,” I say. “I’m starting to feel useless over here.”

“Tighten this strap up,” Kaison says, coming up to me. His cologne encircles me, and I fight off the urge to breathe it in deeply and allow it to make my head spin. He’s standing close enough to me that I can feel the edge of his sleeve brushing against my hand. It’s quiet and intimate between us, and time slows down as he works to saddle the horse.

“There you go,” he says at last. “You and Smokie will make fast friends.”

“Need some help mounting?” he asks.

“Well, I’m not in the mood to make a complete fool of myself, so yeah. That would probably be for the best.”

Kaison chuckles and shows me how to put my foot in the stirrup and hoist myself over.

Somehow I make it up without falling and landing face first into the manure. “Wow! I’m actually up here. This is a lot higher off the ground than I was expecting.”

Kaison smiles and hands me the reins. “You’ll use these to control the horse. Pull in the direction you want to go, and Smokie will know what to do. If you want to stop, say something like ‘whoa’ and pull back on the reins and she’ll stop. Got it?”

“Yeah. And if I want to go, I kick her in the ribs, right?”

He laughs. “Or loosen the reins. You probably don’t want to be too aggressive with the kicking. A little squeeze should be good enough.”

“Okay. Got it.”

He climbs up on a spirited chestnut horse that looks to be male. I can’t tell if it’s a gelding or a stallion. I don’t really know enough about it. “What’s your horse’s name?” I ask.

“This one is Firebolt.” He leans forward and rubs the horse’s nose. “He’s one of our racehorses.”

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“Is he the neutered kind, or does he still have all the plumbing available?”

Kaison laughs. “Firebolt is a stallion. He’s fathered several colts before. Many of them have gone on to be racehorses themselves.” He looks over at Langston, who’s deep in conversation with Jenni and is all aglow. “In fact, Langston’s racehorse, Thunder, is one Firebolt sired.

“I feel like I’m learning a lot about horses today.”

“We should get going. We’re running out of daylight.”

I follow Kaison out of the stable, and sure enough, the sun is low in the sky over the surrounding mountains. The hills are covered in trees ranging from yellow to orange to bright red, with golden light from the lowered sun washing over it. The air is crisp, and there’s a light wind. Now I know why cowgirls keep their hair in braids. They don’t have to worry about it blowing in their faces.

Kaison leads me toward one of the trails that leads into the woods, similar to the trail where I was hobbling around like an idiot with my broken shoe. But this one is heading in another direction. The horse moves beneath me, and it feels like I’m going to fall off at some point. But somehow, I don’t.

Kaison looks at me over his shoulder. “You okay back there?”

“Just dandy.”

He laughs. “You’ll get used to it. You just need to get used to the feel of the horse

moving beneath you.”

“How long have you been riding?” I ask.

“Since before I can remember. My parents have always had horses. Some of these horses are the descendants of my ancestors’ horses.”

“So they’ve just kept having babies and staying at this stable throughout the years?”

“Yes, just like my family.”

“Aww how cute. The horses and the people—living here and raising babies here together.”

Kaison chuckles. “Pretty much.”

“So your dad grew up here too?” I ask.

“Yeah. And his dad before him. And so on.”

I look back at the mansion in the distance when there’s a break in the trees. It feels like I’m in one of those regency novels I love so much. The sun is dipping low on the horizon and will disappear beneath Blue Mountain in just a few moments.

Whack! A branch slaps me across the face. I startle, and the motion causes my heels to jab into Smokie’s side. The horse bolts forward and dashes down the trail. I scream and jerk back on the reins. Kaison is ahead of me, but Smokie just darts right past him. I’m bouncing up and down and squeeze my legs to hold on. Smokie only runs faster. I dig my hands into her mane and hold on for dear life, heart pounding in time to the hooves pounding the ground at lightning speed. Just when I’m sure this supposedly gentle horse is about to buck me off, I do the only thing left to do. I

scream my head off. “Help! I’m going to die!”

Kaison appears at my side. “Pull back on the reins,” he calls.

Oh yeah. Pull the reins to stop. But I don’t want to let go of the mane to find the reins, so Smokie just keeps dashing down the trail.

Kaison rides up closer to us, keeping pace with my very naughty horse. He reaches over and pulls on the reins and says, “Whoa.”

Both horses slow down. But my heart is still beating at warp speed.

“I think I just saw my life flashing before my eyes,” I say.

Jenni and Langston come galloping up on their horses. I mean, I don’t know if that’s the official name for whatever their horses are doing because I’m not a horsey kind of person, but it looks like something I’d call galloping. Or maybe trotting? Or cantering? Is that a thing? Who knows? All I know is their horses are coming at me fast.

“Are you okay?” Jenni asks. “I heard screaming.”

“We have it under control now,” Kaison says. “It was a little sketchy for a moment there.”

“Yeah... that’ll teach me to enjoy a nice sunset when there are branches lurking about.”

“At least you didn’t get knocked off by the branch that hit you,” Langston says.

“Good point. I’ll count my blessings.” I know I’m being snarky, but I really am

grateful that I'm okay. I could have died today. Okay, maybe not died, but it was pretty scary for a minute there.

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“Good job rescuing your woman,” Jenni says to Kaison.

“Oh, she’s not...”

“We’re not together,” we say at the same time, pointing between us.

Jenni cocks her head to the side like she doesn’t quite believe what we’re saying.

“You might want to rethink that stance.”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“We’re coworkers,” Kaison says. “It could get awkward.”

“Or it could get good,” Langston says, rubbing his hands together.

And for that one moment, for the first time in a long time, I allow myself to think about what he’s saying. It really could be good with Kaison. He’s proved to me today that he’s right there for me when I’m in trouble. For that matter, he proved that the first time I met him, when I practically fell into his lap. He caught me. And the thought warms my heart.

Would it really be so bad to let him in just a little bit?

24

KAISON

“It’s been a while since we had everyone here together for Thanksgiving,” Dad says, looking out over the crowded table laded with the turkey and all the traditional sides.

After going around and all of us saying what we’re thankful for, Dad says a prayer and then a frenzy of food being filled onto plates ensues. Mom insisted on joining Lidia in the kitchen to make her famous sweet potato casserole. She’s been feeling a lot better lately, and soon Ariana and I will be returning to Atlanta.

“Mom, your sweet potatoes are amazing,” Brensen says. “I can’t believe you were on your feet long enough to make them.”

“She probably shouldn’t have,” Dad says. “Her knee is extra swollen now.”

“I’m fine. I’ll just put some ice on it.”

“Shouldn’t you have some on there now?”

She waves a dismissive hand at me. “I’ll do it later. I want to enjoy Thanksgiving now.”

“Thank you for having me,” Ariana says. “All of this food is so amazing.”

“You’re practically family now,” Mom says, adding under her breath, “And if Kaison would get his act together, it could be official.”

I bite back a retort. I don’t want to say anything about the subject in front of Ariana. But how can I be with someone who wants to keep things professional? I’m not sure Ariana will ever want to be with me that way. But the longer I’m around her, the more it seems to be a good option.

After we finish dinner, Weston says, “Who’s up for some board games?”

Our family has a massive collection that we've been amassing since we were all little. Every now and then one of them gets worn out, and my mom replaces it with a new version.

Callie leads us into the family room and opens the massive closet that holds our games. She pulls down Risk. "Who's ready to be conquered?"

"Oh, you're so on," I say.

"You seem pretty confident in your ability to take us down," Ariana says with a challenge in her voice.

We head into the dining room to see if the table's been cleared off yet. Zeb and Mittens are both up there, one on each side of the turkey carcass, happily chowing down.

"Oh, those little stinkers," Ariana says.

Callie goes to scoop up Zebra, but the little rascal darts out of her grip and lands into the green bean casserole. Zeb freaks out and dashes off the table, leaving a little trail of goopy cat footprints behind him.

In the meantime, Weston grabs for Mittens, but she takes off through the scalloped potatoes and knocks over a bottle of vintage wine from our cellar that probably costs as much as a brand-new Honda Civic. The wine soaks into Mom's prized white tablecloth that's been passed down through the generations.

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I grab the bottle and right it before it can cause further damage. Lidia rushes into the room and lets out a string of words in Spanish when she sees Mittens digging her claws into the tablecloth. The frightened kitten bounds off the table and dashes off down the hall.

“I guess they were hungry,” Langston says with a chuckle, coming into the room with a trivia game tucked under his arm.

“Why don’t you just fix them their own Thanksgiving dinner plate?” Ariana suggests.

“They have food in their bowls, and it’s not the cheap dry stuff either,” I say. “This kind of food isn’t good for them. It could upset their stomachs.

“We’re playing Risk,” Callie says, pointing to the trivia game Langston is holding.

“Yeah, but there are too many of us to really play that, so I thought I’d start another group in the family room.”

“Good idea,” Mom says.

“So it’ll be Callie, Weston, me, and Ariana?” I ask.

“Sounds good to me,” Weston says.

Lidia and a couple of other staff members start clearing off the table.

“I can help with that,” Ariana offers, handing a plate to Lidia. When they’re out of

earshot, Callie leans over to her. “You’re supposed to let them do it. They don’t want to lose their jobs because they’re letting you do it for them. I had to learn that the hard way.”

“It just feels so weird to have someone waiting on me hand and foot.”

“You should be used to it by now,” I say. “You’ve been here for a month now.”

“I’m not sure it’s something I could ever get used to,” Ariana admits.

But if she ever really did join our family, she would need to. At least when she was at Mom and Dad’s. At our place, she could have as many staff members around as she wanted. For some reason, it doesn’t make me feel panicky to think about a life with Ariana and how we might choose to live. Maybe I’ve healed more than I realized from what happened with Blair.

Seeing her again helped me recognize I wasn’t missing out on much. She’s not the same woman she was when I was dating her. It’s been good to see that firsthand. She’s not even my type now. Normally, the girl Ariana was at the club was my type, but that’s shifted for me. Every version of Ariana is my type. I’m finding her appearance doesn’t matter as much as I’d originally thought. It’s what’s inside of her that matters most. And she’s beautiful inside and out whatever way she chooses to dress, whether that’s her in braids and a flannel shirt or her in pajama pants with her hair down or her all dressed up in her work suit with her hair pulled back into a severe bun.

Once the table has been cleared, we settle around it and set up our game.

“Are you one of those players who tries to hunker down in Australia and build up your forces while everyone else is spreading themselves thin?” I ask Ariana.

“What makes you think I’m going to reveal my strategy to you? You’re the enemy.”

“We could always build an alliance,” I suggest, taking the red pieces out of the little plastic bag they’re stored in.

Ariana looks over at me, and a shock of electricity jolts up my spine as our gazes collide. There’s something so exciting about competing with her, even if this is a board game. It makes me want to take her in my arms and kiss that competitive expression right off her face.

“You do know all alliances have to end in this game, right?”

“But they can still be beneficial if you do it right,” I say, keeping my gaze on hers, my ears getting hot under her scrutiny. The words between us feel heavy with a double meaning.

An hour into the game, we end up forming an alliance, and we wipe out the entire board over the next hour.

“Well, you guys make quite the team,” Weston says. “I don’t think you’ve ever beat me at Risk before, Kaison.”

“Usually, I’m the one taking him out,” Callie says.

“That’s because I let you win.” Weston grins. “I don’t like sleeping on the couch.”

“You can tell yourself that if it makes you feel better,” Callie says. “And what kind of monster do you think I am? I wouldn’t make you sleep on the couch. We have plenty of guest bedrooms for you to choose from.”

“See what I mean? I have to go easy on her for my own good.”

The two of them stick around to watch the rest of the game.

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I look across the table and catch Ariana's gaze. A challenging smile lights up her face. "You ready to lose?"

"I'm not afraid to win. I can sleep in my own bed tonight."

"You think if we were married that I'd make you sleep on the couch?" Ariana teases.

My breath catches, and my heart does this funny little jump in my chest at her mention of marriage. "I would hope not." Because I wouldn't want to be away from her, not for one night.

"What's this about you two getting married?"

Mom's ears must have been extra vigilant tonight because she heard us from all the way across the living room.

"Hypothetically married," I say. "It was a joke, Mom." I'm afraid I've hurt Ariana's feelings, but I glance over and she's smiling.

"There's always a root of truth to every joke," Mom says.

I laugh. Although Ariana was the one to make the joke, I know better than to hope that she might actually want to explore something a bit more serious with me.

Mom settles at the table to watch the rest of the game. Ariana has all of Asia and Australia. It turns out she was the kind to hunker down in Australia, and it's done well for her. I have North and South America and we're fighting over Africa and

Europe.

Mom leans over and whispers something in Ariana's ear.

"Hey, you're helping the enemy? I'm your own son," I complain.

Mom and Ariana just laugh together. Not one ounce of sympathy or remorse between the two of them.

First, I lose all of Europe, and then Ariana conquers the few remaining territories I have left in Africa, effectively winning the game. I get the impression that she didn't need my mom's help. She would have kicked my rear either way. And for some reason, I don't even care. She can win all she wants. Because now she's smiling, and it's the most beautiful thing in the world to see her so happy.

I want to put a smile on her face like this one every day for the rest of her life, and I'll do what it takes to show her I'm tired of my bachelor days.

25

ARIANA

After Kaison's brothers and Callie leave for the night, I head up to my room. I pull up my laptop and get a few more words in. The story is almost finished. The characters have overcome their pasts and have gotten together. The rest is just a matter of tying up some of the loose ends.

I pull up my web browser and start doing some research about the differences between self-publishing and traditional publishing. Everything Kaison has told me seems to be the general consensus about the subject. It would be nice to skip over the long process of writing letter after letter to various agents.

There's something freeing about the idea of having my book out there so soon. For so long, I've put myself into this box of only allowing myself to land a traditional book deal. Like that would somehow prove my worth to myself. The truth is, I've already done that. My book is still far from perfect, but it's a good story and I'm proud of it.

I head down to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. It's a bit of a hike to get there, definitely a downside to having a huge house. If I ever buy a big place, I'm putting a mini fridge in my room with drinks and snacks in it.

The truth is, I've been thinking about what a life with Kaison would be like. It doesn't mean I'm not terrified of getting my heart broken. After all the losses in my life—my parents and my grandparents—I'm so scared of losing another important person in my life. But I adore his family, and I don't want to lose them too. Will I ever have a reason to see them again if I'm not dating Kaison? Our stay in Blue Mountain is coming to an end, and then we'll go back to city life, the race to make it to the top at the office, the men treating me like a stupid little girl.

When I get to the kitchen, I open the fridge and pull out a bottle of water. I close the door to see Kaison standing there just inches from my face.

I scream and drop my bottle of water. And that punk! All he does is laugh.

But he does bend down to pick up my bottle. At least it hasn't busted.

"You okay?" he asks.

"You scared the daylights out of me."

"You up for some pumpkin pie?" He goes into the fridge after me and pulls out a foil-covered pie pan.

“Sure. I’ve already eaten three slices of pie today, but it’s been enough time that I can have another.”

He grins. “That’s the spirit.”

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“Can’t forget the whipped cream.” I reach into the fridge door and hand him the red can.

“Good thinking. Having pumpkin pie without whipped cream is a criminal offense.” He takes out a slice of pie and puts it onto one of the paper plates still stacked on the countertop from earlier, and tops it with whipped cream. There’s a caddy with a bunch of plasticware nearby, and he grabs a fork from there too.

Then, instead of digging into the pie himself, he surprises me by placing it into my hands.

“Oh, thanks.” I settle at the bar and watch as he gets a slice for himself. “I have a question for you.”

He looks up at me from the pie, and my cheeks get hot.

“Um.” Why am I suddenly so nervous? Is it the way his gaze is burning into me like he wants to take me in his arms and kiss me? And it wouldn’t be the first time. I’ve thought of our hot tub kiss many times since it happened. Does he think about it as much as I do? Focus, Ariana. Ask him your question. “Would you be willing to read over what I’ve written so far and give me some feedback? I know it’s not what you’re used to writing, but you’re another author and I could use another set of eyes on my book.”

“You’d be okay with that?” He seems surprised by my request.

“You’re not going to be too critical, are you?”

“I won’t do that,” he says, grabbing his pie plate and settling atop the barstool next to me. “Unless you want me to.” He wiggles his eyebrows up and down like that’s supposed to be seductive or something.

But I can only laugh. “Stop it. How am I supposed to take you seriously when you’re doing that?”

“That’s the point. You need to loosen up.” He shoves a forkful of pie into his mouth.

“You’re such an idiot sometimes.”

“It’s part of being in this family. We may make good businessmen, but we’re all a little stupid, too.”

“I like that about you guys,” I surprise myself by saying.

His gaze moves down to my mouth, and my breath catches. “You mean you like that about me?”

“Well, you’re one of the Keiths, so naturally.”

“Are you admitting you like something about me?” he asks.

“I guess I am.”

“I thought I was the enemy,” he says.

“Maybe you’ve grown on me.” It’s scary to admit it to him, but it’s true. He’s grown on me a lot.

He leans in and brushes his lips against mine, tentatively, like he’s not sure it’s okay.

But I give him a little bit of encouragement.

I wrap my hands around his neck and thread my fingers through the hair at the base of his neck. He groans against my mouth and kisses me more fervently. My head spins as the kiss lengthens, my pie abandoned. I'm lost in the feel of his lips on mine and his soft hair beneath my probing fingertips.

But then a sinking feeling settles over me, and I pull away as I realize he might have just done this very thing with that blonde ponytail girl who showed up. For all I know, he's been dating her this entire time.

"What's wrong?" His brow furrows.

"I hate to be that girl, but there's something that's bugging me," I say.

"Okay, what is it?"

"Are you dating that girl who stopped by in the red convertible?"

"No way."

"There seemed to be something between you two," I say, hating myself for even bringing it up.

"I don't want her, Ariana. I want you."

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I look up into his beautiful blue eyes. “You do?” I’m so scared of getting hurt, just like when my parents died, like when my grandma died. I was only nineteen. She’d raised me.

“You’re all I can think about. I’m falling in love with you. I know it’s unprofessional and all that stuff we’ve talked about before, but I’m past caring. I can’t hide my feelings from you anymore.”

My heart is pounding at this point. I’ve been so focused on my career up until this point in my life that no guy has told me anything like this before. I’ve never given any guy that chance before. But Kaison is worth it. But I need to know the truth before I allow myself to fall much farther than I have so far.

“You’re sure you’re not thinking about starting something up with her?”

“With Blair?” He scoffs. “No. Not after all she’s put me through. Although she’d probably want that.”

Now I’m curious. “What has she done?”

“She’s my ex-girlfriend.”

“The one you told me about? Who cheated with your roommate?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

This is so much worse than I’d originally thought. He says he doesn’t want her, but

he was going to propose to her at one point. He was in love with this girl. “After all that, she came back and flirted with you? That doesn’t tempt you a little bit to explore where things might go with her?”

“Ariana,” he says gently. “I told you I don’t want her. She cheated on me. Whatever we had between us is dead and has been for years.”

That does make me feel a bit better, but I still don’t like it.

“Why did she come back? Was she trying to get back together with you?” I ask, afraid to hear the answer.

“She said she was, but I suspect that she was lying.”

“What gave you that impression?” I ask.

“She asked for money.”

“She had a lot of nerve,” I say. “So she cheated on you and then shows up years later without an apology and hits you up for cash?”

“Basically. Like I said, I’m not interested in anything with her.” He gets another forkful of pie. “I told security I don’t want her to be allowed on the property again,” he says before eating.

“How did she get in to begin with?” I ask.

“Believe me,” he says after he swallows, “Blair has a way of getting what she wants. She probably sweet-talked the security guards.”

I believe him, but that’s part of the problem. It means I don’t want to push him away

as much as I did before.

And that might be the scariest part of all.

26

KAISON

After saying goodnight to Ariana, I get a ding on my phone. It's an email from her with her book attached. I go back to my room and open the book on my laptop. I'd brought it up last night after finishing work for the day so I could get some words in on my latest book. I'm hoping to hit one of the bestseller lists with this one so I'm putting my all into it.

But tonight is about Ariana. I settle into my bed with my laptop and stack a few pillows behind me. Her book opens at a darling little bookshop with her two characters colliding and books flying everywhere. It's cute, like something from a movie.

Her characters are snarky and have a chemistry that sizzles off the page.

I end up staying up until I finish the entire book. By then, it's later than I care to admit, and I snap my laptop closed and crash out for the night.

* * *

Lidia makes breakfast burritos that are to die for the next morning. Ariana comes down to find me sitting at the table with one on my plate.

“That looks good.”

“I’ll get you one,” Lidia says to her. “You have a seat and enjoy Mr. Kaison.”

“Thank you,” Ariana says, then looks at me. “I’m still not sure I’ll ever get used to having someone wait on me like that.”

“Didn’t your grandma do that for you?” I ask.

“I never let her. I always was the one taking care of her,” Ariana says.

Lidia comes into the room and sets the plate in front of her. “You just relax. It’s my job to feed you as long as you’re a guest at this house, and I love what I do.”

Ariana’s shoulders relax at Lidia’s words.

“You’ll get used to it,” I say.

“You think I’ll be back here again?”

I smile at her. “If I have anything to do with it, you will. I’d like you to stick around, spend time with me and my family for Christmas. That is, unless you already have plans,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Farah and her parents are going to Europe with her boyfriend.”

“So you’ll just be alone on Christmas?” I ask.

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but yeah.” She shrugs. “It wouldn’t be the first Christmas I’ve spent alone.”

“That’s just wrong,” I say. “You’re coming here then. We’ll throw you the perfect Keith family Christmas. Lidia makes cinnamon rolls that morning that are to die for. And there’s ham and turkey for Christmas dinner.”

“That sounds amazing. I probably would have had takeout that night.”

“Alone in your apartment. Wait, I’m assuming you have an apartment. We haven’t really talked about this.”

“It’s an apartment. I share it with my cousin Farah.”

All this time, I’d been so focused on my family that I hadn’t asked her a lot about hers or her living situation. “The truth is, I want to know everything. I want to know you, Ariana.”

“I’m pretty boring,” she says.

“Nothing about you is boring. Because you’re amazing to me.”

A blush comes over Ariana’s cheeks. “No one’s ever told me that before.”

“Well, get used to hearing it.”

Her shoulders stiffen. “What about my job? Can’t I get fired if I let you do something like that?”

“No one will fire you, Ariana. My family adores you.”

“You’ve got that right!” My mom calls from the living room. I’ve been so busy talking to Ariana that I haven’t even noticed her sitting there. But now that I see her there, it’s pretty clear that she’s been listening in for a while because she’s grinning ear to ear, probably planning out our wedding and what baby clothes she wants to buy for us. She tends to get a little carried away with the romantic stuff.

“Speaking of adoring you,” I say. “I really enjoyed your book. It was fantastic. I don’t read romance much, but your book read like a romcom movie, and I’ve seen plenty of those. I can see a lot of potential for your book to be pretty successful. It seems like you read a lot.”

“I do, and I have for years.”

“Ariana wrote a book?” Mom gets up and comes over to us.

“Sorry about that,” I say. “I hope it’s okay that I shared that just now.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’ve decided to try self-publishing, and now that the manuscript is almost finished, I’m excited to get the word out.”

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Mom plops into the seat next to Ariana. “Tell me all about this book of yours. I can’t believe you’ve been hiding this from me. I love to read.”

The two women fall into a deep discussion, and I decide to take the rest of my feedback and type it up for Ariana in an email, so it’s for her eyes only.

Ariana is careful not to mention anything about how I’ve influenced her or the fact that I’m a writer as well. She’s done a better job of being stealthy about things than I have. But then again, she didn’t swear me to secrecy.

“I can’t believe we have a real, live author in this household. Be sure to talk to us little folk when you’re rich and famous.”

Ariana’s eyes slide over to mine, and a small smile plays at the ends of her lips. But she doesn’t say a word about my secret.

“I can’t wait to get all the ladies at the knitting club to buy your book,” Mom gushes. “Oh, I’m such a sucker for a good romance. Tell me, is your book the spicy kind or the sweet kind?”

“It’s the sweet kind.” Ariana glances my way and then blushes. “I don’t think I could write anything beyond kissing.”

I keep my chuckle to myself.

“Well, that’s all I read, so perfect,” Mom says. “Although, Maybelline does like to read some of the...more colorful books... but I’m sure she won’t mind that yours is

clean. We're going to have to get your book sold in the local bookshop and everything!"

Ariana's face is so full of joy at the attention my mom is giving her. It's hitting me how much she's connected with my mom since she's been here. They've formed quite a bond. It's probably been a long time since Ariana had a mother figure in her life. And I'm more than happy to share my mom with her.

* * *

Later that night, Ariana finds me in one of the upstairs living spaces, sitting by the fire with my feet up on an ottoman, a blanket over me, and a cup of coffee in my hands.

"Well, don't you look cozy," she says.

"There's room here on the loveseat, if you want to join me."

She takes a seat next to me, snuggling into my warmth. I take the blanket and cover her. "Do you want anything?" I ask. "Like hot cocoa or tea?"

"Some peppermint tea would be nice. I saw some in the pantry earlier."

I pull my phone out and call Mrs. Hunt. "Can you bring some peppermint tea to Ariana?" I ask and explain which room we're in.

"Of course. Do you want any of the cookies Lidia made to go with it?"

"Well, that should be obvious," Ariana says.

I laugh. "Yes to the cookies." I hang up and sit for a moment, savoring the feel of

Ariana against me.

“Kaison?”

“Hmm?”

She looks up at me. “Can you show me how to buy your book online? I want to order an e-copy.”

“You do?”

Her eyes are serious when she speaks. “I promise I won’t tell anyone who you are. You can trust me.”

“Well, after I spilled the beans about your book in front of my mom, I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to blab my secrets.”

She twists to look at me better. “I wouldn’t do that. I’m happy that your mom knows. You don’t need to beat yourself up about it. I’m not even planning to use a pen name. It’s not a secret.”

That lifts a little of the guilt off my shoulders. I’ve worked so hard to keep my secret. I’m probably being overly cautious because of that.

It’s a big deal that Ariana wants to read my book. And it’s a big deal that I want to trust her enough to let her in on my secret. But I do. I want to share that part of myself with her. She’s quickly becoming my best friend. I can’t think of another person I’d like to share my secret identity with.

I pull out my phone and tap the screen a few times until a sales page shows up. It’s my top-selling book. The first in a long series. “You’ll want to start with this one. I

hear the author is pretty good.”

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I hand her my phone with a light smile, and my heart pounds as I give up my biggest secret to the woman I'm quickly falling deeper in love with every day.

27

ARIANA

I stay up late reading Kaison's book Friday night. It's full of nail-biting suspense and twists and turns. There's a psychopathic killer posing as a nice guy. And no one knows it's him. I keep flipping through the pages—it's an ebook, so I'm really just swiping, but same difference, right? The story has me completely sucked in. Why does Kaison want to hide this masterpiece from his family? They would be so proud of him if they knew he'd written it.

We only worked half a day on Friday because of the holiday, but I'm hoping to finish the rest of the project tomorrow, even though it's the weekend. I put the book down just past midnight, so I'm not such a zombie in the morning. I could stay up all night reading it.

I snuggle under my covers, thinking about the intricate plot that Kaison has woven and how three-dimensional his characters are, flawed but beautiful. The love story he's weaving into the narrative is full of tension and emotion. It's not often that you read a crime thriller with such well-developed characters. Usually they're more plot heavy.

I'm not ready for this weekend to be over. What if Kaison and I go back to normal when we're in the office? Keeping things professional. It's what I've been wanting all

this time, but now I'm not so sure that's the case anymore. Because Kaison has those lips, and don't get me started on those abs.

But aren't the players usually the hot ones people regret going after? It might be too late for me. I'm still so scared that he might be sneaking around with other women. How can I learn to trust him?

People always leave me. Why would it be any different with Kaison?

* * *

I have to drink an extra cup of coffee to stay awake the next morning. But the exhaustion is worth it.

I can't tell Kaison how much I enjoyed his book because his brothers are over and keep popping into the room unexpectedly. Finally, I shoot him a text.

Your book is amazing. I'm about halfway through. I stayed up way too late reading it last night.

He texts me back a smiley face and then looks up at me over his phone. Our gazes collide, and I can see how much my words mean to him. It's written across his face—a mix of gratitude and... love? All I know is his eyes are tender when he looks at me.

My fingers fly across my phone screen again, and I look back up at him.

You should tell your family. They would be so proud of you.

His gaze lingers on his phone, and he bites his bottom lip. It's like he doesn't know he's doing it, but it's very distracting. Finally, he types something out.

I look down at my phone when it vibrates in my hand.

I'll give it some thought.

Well, he's not completely dismissing my idea. It's a start.

"You don't need to prove yourself to anyone," I say out loud. I know it's the only reason he's keeping his writing life a secret. "They love you just as you are."

"It's not that I need to prove my worth to them. It's for myself."

That's deeper than I expected. "Explain."

He bends his head over the phone and types something out.

I want to do it on my own. Show myself that I'm more than just my family's money.

"But you don't need to show yourself that. Can't you see how amazing you are all on your own?"

He shrugs. "I guess it's hard to explain."

"I can't imagine what that must be like."

"I mean, most people would think I have nothing to complain about. But always being in the shadow of what others have done can be a little hard on the self-esteem sometimes."

This conversation really was getting deep, and I'm surprised he's willing to admit as much to me. "You always seem so full of confidence. It's hard to believe you struggle with your self-esteem."

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“I can put on a good show. I’ve gotten pretty skilled at it over the years.”

And now he’s opening up his real self to me. How have I earned that level of trust from him? It’s one of the highest compliments he could ever pay me.

We dive back into the project, and I focus on my laptop for the next few hours. A couple hours after lunch, my eyes start to droop again, and I turn to Kaison.

“You want to go grab some coffee? I’m falling asleep over here.”

“Sure. Should we take the Lamborghini again?” He has a wicked smile on his face.

“Only if you want your dad to fire you.”

“Oh, fine,” he says. “We’ll take my Mercedes.” He’d had it sent up after being up here for a few days.

“What a sacrifice,” I say sarcastically as we head to the garage. “How much did you pay for this car, anyway?”

He shrugs as he opens my door for me. “I have no idea what things cost. I just buy them.”

I get inside. “What? You don’t balance your checkbook or anything?” I can’t believe it.

When he’s behind the wheel, and the garage door opens, he says, “I don’t buy stuff

much. Mostly Corey does the shopping for me. Like groceries, takeout, clothes, household items.” He pulls out of the garage, and we head down the long driveway toward Blue Mountain.

“Do you have a cook at your place?” I ask.

“No, I like to cook for myself or I go get takeout.”

“All this time we’ve spent together has been at your parents’ place. I don’t even know how you live when you’re on your own.”

“I know.” He glances over at me. “I’d like to get to know you better when we get back to Atlanta.”

“Like date each other?” I ask.

“Yes. I’d like to take you out to my favorite restaurants. Travel someplace nice with you.”

“I’d like that.” I wasn’t expecting him to say that. I figured he’d go back to his player ways when we got back to Atlanta. There’s so much more to do there, more women to date. And then there’s the whole office dynamic. “But do you think we’d need to keep it quiet?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “How do you feel about it?”

“I’m afraid of losing my job.”

“What if we went to my parents and told them we were together?” he suggests as he turns out of the driveway.

“You’d be willing to do that?” It’s a big risk, but isn’t Kaison worth the risk?

“Of course I would. I love you, Ariana. I want to be with you.”

“You do?” I’m stunned. Does that mean he’s not going to keep looking for other women? Or is this something he says to keep women around? I’m so scared of letting him in that it almost feels safer to assume that he’s just a player and not a man who wants a serious, monogamous relationship with me. That’s my problem. I’m scared of being left again.

But I want to believe him. Being with Kaison is a dream come true. And not just because of his money or fantastic lifestyle. He’s sweet and handsome and easy to talk to. It feels natural to spend time in his presence.

He pulls into the coffee shop, and his phone rings. “Shoot. I have to take this. You go ahead. I’ll meet you inside.”

“Not a problem.” I head inside. The smell of coffee brewing hits my nose as I enter Blue Mountain Brewery. A Christmas tree stands in the corner of the room, and the couches around the room are mostly empty at this time of day. But a familiar figure stands at the counter, ordering. There aren’t too many in Blue Mountain with a sleek blonde ponytail that are long or artificial looking.

She turns to look at me when the twinkling of the bell on the door sounds. What’s she doing here, anyway? As far as I know, she doesn’t live in Blue Mountain. The only thing I can think of is that she’s here for Kaison, and that doesn’t sit well with me at all.

Her eyes light with recognition. “You’re Kaison’s employee, right?”

“I work with him,” I say.

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“Nice to meet you. I’m Blair.” She sticks a hand out, and I can’t just stare at it, so I shake it.

I stand there for a moment as silence stretches between us. I can’t exactly ask her what she’s doing in Blue Mountain, can I? I’m not really the nosy type, but I really am curious. Mostly because it feels like she’s encroaching on my territory. “Are you from here?” I finally ask.

“Oh no. I’m just in town for the weekend.” She pays for her order and stands to the side.

I step up to the register and order a peppermint mocha that they’re offering for the season, along with a brownie that catches my attention.

“I’m not usually one to intrude,” Blair says after I’ve paid. “But woman to woman, you should be careful with Kaison.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. She has my full attention.

“I got the impression that there was something going on between the two of you.”

I stay quiet. I’m not telling this woman anything. It’s none of her business, and I don’t trust her at all.

When it’s clear I’m not giving her an answer, she goes on. “Kaison and I were in a relationship together for four years. I know him better than most.”

“Okay, what’s your point?”

“That man is still in love with me after all these years. He clearly hasn’t let go of the past. I don’t want you getting into a relationship with someone who doesn’t have a heart to give. Anyway, he’s changed now. He’s not the man he was when we dated.”

“Changed how?” I ask.

“He’s got quite the wandering eye. Always jumping from girl to girl. It’s because he’s still in love with me after all these years. It’s pretty sad, really.”

Wasn’t he the one who rejected her? But still, her words hit me hard. Could there be truth to what she’s saying? Is that why Kaison is such a flirt?

“He’s been trying to numb the pain. It’s not the best tactic. Therapy or taking up a hobby would be better.”

She obviously doesn’t know him as well as she says. He’s written a lot of books since dating her. But it doesn’t sit right with me that he might still be hung up on her. How can I know he’s really over her? He says he doesn’t want her, but what if he’s not being truthful with me?

Am I telling myself this because I’m trying to protect my heart from getting left again? Or is it actually valid? I can’t think about it now. All I know is I want to get out of here.

I get my order and start to say goodbye to Blair.

“Girl, if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you.” She writes her number on a napkin and hands it to me before I leave.

I hesitate before taking it and shoving it into my coat pocket with the plan to throw it away when I get home. There's no way I want to talk to her again. I step out into the cool air, and a few flurries begin to fall. It's unusual for this time of year in Georgia, even in the mountains. It's beautiful, but likely won't stick.

I climb back into the car just as Kaison is hanging up.

"Sorry that took so long," he says. "It looks like you already got your coffee. I don't have to get any if you want to just go. I had an energy drink earlier."

"Yeah, let's just head back." I don't want him to know I bumped into Blair in there. The last thing I need is for him to see her again and start having old memories coming back to him again.

When we get back to the house, I turn to him. "I'm not so sure about this dating thing."

"What changed? You were completely on board before you went into the coffee shop."

"Maybe we ought to cool things off for a bit until we're both ready for a relationship." I climb out of the car before he can get my door.

"I'm ready now." He circles the car and steps up to face me, snow falling all around us.

I look up at his handsome face and search his features. But is he really?

And what about me? Am I ready to put myself in a place where I could be heartbroken again? I'm not sure Blair knows what she's talking about, but it's enough to stop me from rushing into a relationship before I know the guy is emotionally

available.

Only time will tell if this will ever work between us.

28

KAISON

“Where is this coming from, Ariana?” I have to fight to keep the panic out of my voice. I love her too much to lose her now. I’ve finally allowed myself to open my heart after getting it broken when Blair cheated on me, and now it turns out that I was wrong to allow myself to put my heart at risk?

“Please, just trust me. It’s better for both of us if I take a step back from you romantically.”

“But we just said we love each other. Is that what this is about? Are you just getting cold feet because we’re committing?”

I’d just been daydreaming while sitting in the car of building a house of my own in Blue Mountain and maybe starting a family with Ariana one day. I know it’s a little early to be thinking about that, but I’m a family man and spending so much time around my mom has made me rethink how I’ve been living my life lately. I’m tired of hitting on random women and only having shallow relationships that don’t go anywhere. Ariana gets the real me. Where else will I find a woman I can trust enough to share my writing secrets with? And a woman who understands the joy of putting words on paper?

No, Ariana is special, unlike any other woman I’ve ever met. Whatever I had with Blair pales in comparison to the weeks I’ve spent with Ariana in Blue Mountain.

I don't want to accept what she's saying about taking a break from things. But I also have enough respect for her wishes that I'm not going to push what I want on her. My mom has always taught me to listen to the words another person is saying and accept their truth. That doesn't mean you fall for other people who are lying to you. But it does mean that if someone says they need something, you should take them seriously and not brush their words to the side.

It's so, so painful, but I say, "I understand. If you need some space, then I'm going to respect that. But I love you, and I'm a patient guy. I can wait a long time if that's what you need."

Her expression softens. "Thank you, Kaison. That means a lot to me."

"But I don't want to make your life harder, either. Maybe it will be best for me to find another job. The project is finished, and I've fulfilled what your dad has asked me to do."

My heart is shattering with every word she's saying. "Having you around doesn't make my life harder. It makes it better. You're like the sun breaking through the clouds, Ariana. I need that sun in my life. It's been dark for way too long."

"Dark? I thought you were having the time of your life, going out there and dating."

"I may have looked like I was having fun on the outside, but inside I was dying."

"Because you missed Blair?" I can see how much the words hurt her as she asks the question.

"I—" How can I answer the question without inflicting more pain on her?

"It's okay. You don't have to explain anything to me. I get it." She turns away from

me and starts heading toward the door that leads to the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“I need to pack up. The rest of this project can be finished tonight after I go back to Atlanta.”

“You’re leaving tonight?” I ask. “I thought we were leaving tomorrow night.”

“I don’t want to impose any longer than I already have.” She disappears into the house.

I follow her and find her in the conference room, closing up her laptop. “This will all be done by Monday morning.”

“But we were all going to go to church tomorrow, and don’t say you’re a burden or imposing. Because you’re welcome in our home. Everyone likes you.”

“And I like them too. I know this is hard, but sometimes we need to do hard things.”

But it’s dumb. Why is she running when she’s happy and in love? Why sabotage everything we’ve found together?

She loads her computer into her bag and zips it up before slinging it over her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Kaison.”

My heart feels like it’s being ripped from my chest. How am I supposed to go on without her in my life?

“I’ll turn in my two weeks’ notice on Monday after everything is turned in.”

“I understand. But if you change your mind, I’m here waiting for you.” It hurts so much to say the words.

Her back is still, and I can tell she’s put her mask back on because her expression is cool and professional. I’d thought we were past that. I’ve seen her face be so warm and open toward me. She’s been vulnerable and tender at moments. It’s the worst insult to see her treating me like a stranger.

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Despair slips around me, and I sink into a chair as she disappears and goes up the grand staircase in the foyer.

Somehow, I hope I can change her mind, but I'm not sure it's possible. Maybe this is our new normal.

29

ARIANA

I never should have allowed myself to fall in love with Kaison. All my worst fears have come to pass. I've allowed myself to feel this way, and now I'm paying the price. My heart is so shattered. But I have to protect myself from getting hurt even worse. Nip it in the bud and rip off the Band-Aid. Or whatever the saying is.

I can't be with a man who is emotionally unavailable. I'm afraid he's still hung up on Blair and that everything she said was true. He dated all those women to numb his pain. He might be willing to be with me, but how long will it last? When will he realize it's too scary and decide to run?

After my stuff is packed, I head to the kitchen to grab a few snacks for the road. I put my tote bag on the floor by the pantry and toss some chocolate chip cookies and a few snack-sized bags of chips. I load up my laptop and my suitcase and purse and then come back for the snack bag, setting it on the seat next to me. My car is all gassed up, so I shouldn't need to stop at all.

As I drive down the road, tears pour down my face. I'm going to miss this place, this

family. I don't have the heart to come back for Christmas, which is devastating because I'm sure it will be so beautiful. There are some staff members meticulously wrapping strings of outdoor lights around the branches of the trees lining the driveway.

The security guard waves at me as I leave. Little does he know that I likely will never be back.

That brings on a fresh batch of tears, and I cry so hard that I sneeze. That's weird. I don't usually sneeze when I'm crying. Maybe there's just some cat hair on my bag. I did set it on the floor, after all, and that's where Lidia keeps the kittens' food dishes. I should have been more careful with it and put it on the counter or something.

I keep sneezing for the next hour and a half while I'm driving. I'm going to have to put this bag in the wash when I get home. I reach my hand in to get a bag of cookies, and I touch a little warm ball of fur. I pull my hand back and scream. What's in my bag? My heart is racing, and I pull over on the side of the road. I look over to see Mittens staring up at me with those cute little ears all perked up.

Maybe I should have opted for the allergy shots, after all.

"You little stowaway. You must have been taking a nap in there, getting all cozy in my bag. No wonder it felt a little heavy when I was carrying it out to the car."

Mittens looks back at me and meows in response. I'm almost home so there's no point in turning around now, and I'm afraid if I do, I'll be too weak to walk away from Kaison again.

Kaison deserves someone who isn't going to walk away from him and freak out about past girlfriends. Someone who doesn't have commitment problems. Because, let's face it, the real reason I never dated before isn't because work was too consuming.

That was just the excuse I told myself. The real reason is I'm scared of losing my loved ones. It's too scary to let someone in. It's safer to push them away and accuse them of being in love with past girlfriends.

But I can't think about that too much. I'm not ready. And I'm sneezing again so I need to get some allergy medicine in me. "What am I going to do with you, Mittens? You're going to get cat hair all over my apartment."

But she's so cute. I can't help but take her home. So I give in to the cuteness. I pop open a bottle of Benadryl and take some as soon as I pull into the parking garage at my apartment. Mittens climbs into my lap, and I pet her until she begins to purr. Then I lift her and put her back in the snack bag, this time zipping it up so she doesn't hop out while I'm walking and get lost. Mrs. Keith would not be happy if I lost her kitten.

I really should call her so she doesn't go looking all over the place for Mittens.

"Ariana, where did you go?"

"I headed back to Atlanta."

"But we had plans with you yesterday," she protests. I can tell she's really disappointed.

"I have to tell you something." Hopefully, changing the subject will keep her from asking too many questions about why I left. "Mittens jumped into my snack bag, and I had no idea until I got home. So it looks like I kidnapped your kitten. I can bring her back to you if you want."

"Don't worry about it. I'll send someone to your house to pick her up. I know you have to finish up that project."

She does have a point. I still have some last-minute polishing to do. “Thank you. And sorry I didn’t notice sooner. She was asleep in there so I didn’t hear her, but I was sneezing the entire way home, so that should have given me a clue. I just thought I had cat hair on my bag or something.”

“Well, Mittens is always getting herself into trouble, so don’t feel bad. How could you have known she was going to sneak into your bag?”

Well, she’s been known to jump into cars before. But I thought I was safe since I was parked on the outside of the house instead of in the garage.

I hang up with her and head into my apartment. When I get there, Farah is on the couch with her boyfriend, looking quite cozy. I’m clearly interrupting something.

“Girl, what are you doing here already? I thought you weren’t going to be here until tonight.” Farah hops off her boyfriend, Easton’s, lap and crosses to where I’m standing with my bags.

“It’s a long story.” I sigh and zip open the tote bag to give Mittens some fresh air. She pops her little head out and meows.

“You got a cat?” Farah squeals. “I thought you were allergic.” She reaches out and picks up Mittens, snuggling her to her chest. “She’s so cute. I love little gray striped kitties,” she says in a baby voice to the kitten.

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“I am allergic. She wasn’t supposed to come with me.”

“So you stole a pet from a bunch of billionaires? Are you crazy?” Farah says.

“It was an accident. I already told them. They’re sending someone to pick her up.”

“Aww. I wish she could stay here forever.” She nuzzles her nose to Mittens’.

“We’re going to need to head to the store to get her some food and a litter box,” I say.

“Easton and I can go if you want to stay here and rest up from your trip.”

“That would be really helpful,” I say. “But I can’t rest. I have some work to do.”

“Don’t forget to take breaks from time to time. You really do work too hard sometimes.” She stops and laughs. “Well, what am I saying? Sometimes? Most of the time, let’s just face it.”

“It’s true,” Easton says. “I’ve been over here enough to see if for myself.”

“I’m under a deadline, so this time, it’s valid.”

“Well, we got your back tonight, girl,” Farah says, grabbing her purse from the kitchen counter. “We’ll be back soon with some pet supplies.”

As soon as she shuts the door behind her, my phone rings again. I take it to the couch and Mittens jumps up into my lap. I pick her up and set her next to me, kicking

myself again for not getting allergy shots. The Benadryl can only do so much.

Mrs. Keith is on the phone.

“You and Kaison broke up? He says you’re leaving the company. Please tell me that’s not true, and that you didn’t really mean it.”

“I’m afraid it’s true,” I say.

“Why did you do it?”

“I’ll tell you, but you can’t tell Kaison.” Then I think about it. If it’s really over between us, then maybe it doesn’t matter if he knows the truth. “I ran into his old girlfriend at Blue Mountain Brewery.”

“Blair?”

“Yeah.”

“What was she doing in town again?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe she was trying to get back together with Kaison. That lying snake of a woman had better stay away from my son. She’s been banned from our property so she thought she could stay around town and maybe catch him to prey on him some more.”

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me what she was doing in Blue Mountain.” But she did warn me about Kaison.

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure it out. She’s a gold-digger if I ever saw one. She has all the earmarks of one.”

I’d been so upset about Kaison still being in love with her that I hadn’t gone back to figure out why she was in town still. Maybe there’s some truth to what Mrs. Keith is saying.

“She was warning me about Kaison,” I blurt. “She told me he was dating so many different women because he was still in love with her. To numb the pain of the breakup.”

“That’s a load of garbage if I ever heard one.” She pauses. “Well, maybe there was some truth to it at one point, but he’s way past that now. Don’t you see? He’s in love with you. Not her.”

Even if that’s true, I’m still not ready for a relationship myself. But oh, how I want to be. I would give anything to have Kaison’s arms around me tonight, to hear him tell me Blair means nothing to him and that all his feelings are for me now.

Life really can be so cruel.

“Why don’t you come back for Christmas and see where things go?” she suggests. “You don’t have to make any big promises. Just spend time with us. You can’t spend Christmas alone eating takeout. I won’t stand for it.”

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“I’ll think about it,” I say. “But I’d better let you go. I have to get some work done tonight.”

“Do you need anything for Mittens?” she asks.

“No, my cousin and her boyfriend are headed to the store to grab necessary things for her.”

“I can have someone deliver some items to your door,” she offers.

“That’s so nice of you, but we have it covered.”

“At the very least, let me reimburse you for the supplies.”

“Sure, if it makes you feel better.” She knew my Venmo information since she’d paid me to pick something up for her at the store once.

I hang up with her, and \$600 shows up in my account with a little cat emoji next to it. Mrs. Keith is pretty smartphone savvy for a woman her age. But I can’t help but gawk at the huge amount of money she’s sent me. “What kind of pet supplies does she think I’m buying? A litter box made of gold?” It was like that when she sent me the money for the shopping trip. She’d sent me hundreds of dollars for a couple of loaves of bread and a box of Lucky Charms, and she wouldn’t accept any change from me either.

I text her. Thank you for the money, but you didn’t have to send that much. I’m sure they’re only going to spend about \$20 or \$30.

She answers me quickly. Think of it as gas money too, then.

Thank you.

I'm not used to having someone take care of me, even after weeks of being waited on hand and foot by her staff members. But this is different. It's not her job to spoil me rotten. This feels more personal, and it's doing funny things to my heart to have a mother figure in my life again. I can't help but wipe away tears from her love and generosity.

But will I be able to keep her around, or am I destined to lose her just like the other mother figures in my life?

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KAISON

I've locked myself in my room for the rest of the day. I'm done with my involvement in the project, so now it's up to Ariana to finish it.

I have nothing better to do than wallow in my heartbreak. I spend the rest of the day after she leaves in my bed with the covers pulled up and a box of tissues to wipe away my tears. I'm one of those guys who cries easily, but I never let anyone see me cry. It's a very private, pitiful thing.

A little meow sounds from next to me, and I look down to see Zeb on the floor, begging to be picked up. It's like he can sense that I'm sad and need some comfort. He's learned that my door doesn't latch properly, and he often comes to visit me at night. I would say it's annoying, but I'm a sound sleeper and I often don't realize he's come into the room until morning when I find him curled up next to me. Usually Mittens comes with him, but I haven't seen her in a while.

You would think my parents could afford to fix my door, but it's an antique, and it's probably hard to find the parts for it. Not that they couldn't track it down, but it's one of those things that's been overlooked. I'm sure if I became the squeaky wheel, it would get fixed, but I don't really care. It's nice to wake up with the cute little furballs next to me every morning.

Mom had come to check on me after I missed dinner, and she was able to get the story out of me. Boy, she wasn't happy to hear that Ariana and I had broken things off. I think she was already knitting baby sweaters for our future children.

A text from Ariana pops through. I have Mittens. I swear I didn't kidnap her on purpose.

I type in a quick reply. You sure you're not asking for ransom?

That depends. What are you offering?

I know what I want to say, but I'm not sure she'd like the answer. I want to tell her I'm in love with her and I'm offering myself to her. My heart, my body, and my soul. I want to get down on one knee and offer her the biggest diamond she's ever laid eyes on. But those wouldn't be the words of a guy who's giving her space to figure things out.

But I have to wonder at her question too. What is she expecting me to say? It sounds playful and fun, almost like the old Ariana is back, the one I ache to hold and joke around with.

I don't think you want to hear what I'm offering, so I won't say it.

She doesn't respond, which tells me I'm right.

I finally drag myself out of bed when my stomach gets mad enough at me. I find a container of leftovers in the fridge that Lidia must have put there from dinner. It looks like enchiladas and refried beans. Hers are to die for, and my mouth is watering already.

After I have them heated, I sit to eat at the bar. The side door opens, and Weston and Callie come inside.

“What are you two doing here so late?” I ask.

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“Mom called,” Weston says. “She said you and Ariana broke up and that you’re taking it hard.”

“We came to check on you,” Callie says.

My heart warms to think that my brother is looking out for me like that.

Weston climbs onto the barstool next to me, and Callie gets on the other side of me.

I dig into my food, my head hanging down in misery. I refuse to let them see me get emotional, though.

“You don’t look so good, bro,” Weston says.

“I’ve had better days.”

“You have it bad for her then,” Callie says. “What are you doing still here?”

“I’m giving her space.”

“She doesn’t want space right now, believe me. She wants you to show up at her door and offer her a dozen red roses.”

“No, she does want space.”

“Kaison, she may be telling you that, but it doesn’t mean you don’t try, anyway. If you love her so much, you can’t just let it end so easily.”

“I believe in listening to what others are telling me and respecting their boundaries.”

“You can still respect her boundaries while handing her roses,” Callie says with a grin.

“Well, I do need to head back to Atlanta, anyway.”

“I happen to know of a helicopter you could use to get there faster,” Weston says.

“You still have your BMW convertible at your penthouse, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you don’t even need to drive back. We can get Wilson or Jerry to drop off your car in Atlanta.”

I finish my dinner, letting their words sink in. Maybe they’re right. Would it be so bad to show up at Ariana’s apartment and fight to win her back? “I don’t even know where she lives,” I say.

“I can access the employee database and look up her info right from my phone,” Callie says, tapping on her screen. A few moments later, a screenshot of Ariana’s name, phone number, and address show up in my text messages.

“You’re welcome,” she says. “Call Corey in Atlanta and have him buy roses for you before the stores close. He’ll have to get them from a grocery store at this hour, but she won’t care. Roses are roses.”

“Am I really doing this?” I ask them, standing from the barstool.

“You’d better or Mom will come after you,” Weston says. “And that’s worse than not having Ariana back.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It was a joke, Kaison. Lighten up.” He slaps me on the back.

“Good luck,” Callie says.

The sound of a helicopter landing behind our house fills the air. We had a helipad installed years ago on our property in a clearing some ways away from the house.

“Oh, he’s right on time.” Callie’s smile is huge, like she’s super proud of herself.

“Callie was so convinced she could get you to agree to go after Ariana that she called Rob to come pick you up with the helicopter.”

I can’t help but laugh.

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I don't know if I'm on a fool's errand or not, but Ariana is worth fighting for. She may turn me away, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. It's better than wallowing in my own self-pity all day tomorrow. Speaking of wallowing. I sniff my armpits. It's not good.

Callie laughs. "Maybe you should go take a shower, shave, put on some cologne." She cocks her head to the side. "Or don't shave. The stubble isn't a bad look for you."

I rub my hand across my pokey face. "If you say so."

"You should believe her," Weston says. "Callie knows her stuff. It's part of why I keep her around."

"That and you want babies with me." Callie smirks at him.

"Whoa," Weston says. "One kid at a time."

"I'm just saying," Callie teases. "There are more babies in our future. I want a little Weston Jr. running around."

"Now that I can get behind," I say.

And if tonight goes well, then I might have babies in my future one day too.

The next morning, Corey comes by to pick up Mittens. It's a good thing because I'm getting tired of sneezing. We load him up with the cat carrier, cat bed, litter box, and cat bed Farah got last night. She might have gone a bit overboard on the cat toys for one night, but who was I to tell her not to? She wouldn't even take the reimbursement money from me, insisting that I needed it more than she did if I was going to be looking for a job.

I'd broken down and told her I wouldn't be working for Keith Enterprises for much longer. I didn't give her details, and I could tell she wanted to hear the entire story, but didn't want to press me for too many details.

Over coffee, she said, "You need to tell me what's going on. Why are you so miserable, and why are you quitting your dream job that you've been so excited about?"

"I'm surprised you've held out this long to interrogate me." I sip the hot coffee, feeling better already.

"I wanted to wait until you'd had some sleep. You looked exhausted."

That might have had to do with me staying up late Friday night reading Kaison's book. And I couldn't help myself tonight, either. I ended up staying up until three, finishing the thing. I kind of wanted to leave him a review, but my profile has my name in it and I didn't want his secret identity getting exposed.

"But you're awake enough now. Tell me why you're so upset."

"Is it that obvious?" I ask.

"You look like you've been crying."

I touch my puffy face. I'd tried to cover it up with makeup, but obviously that hadn't been enough.

"I broke up with Kaison."

"Wait. You were dating him? I thought he was a player that you were staying away from? How could you keep something this huge from me?"

"I'm sorry, Farah. I didn't know it was happening until recently. And even then I've been fighting off the idea."

"But why?" she asks. "Because of the player thing?"

"I don't even know anymore. I think it's me at this point," I say. "My reasoning is all jumbled up in my head, and I can't even follow it."

"Well, let's talk it out then," she says. "What are you running from?"

"I don't want my heart getting broken."

"Has Kaison been having a bunch of girls over at the house since you've been there?"

"His ex did show up, and I'm worried he might still be hung up on her. He says he's not, but I'm not so sure."

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“And what about his phone? Is he glued to it, texting people all day?” she asks.

“Not really. Most of the time, he’s talking to me.”

“That doesn’t sound like a player who’s messing around to me. It sounds like he’s in love with you.”

“Well, he did say that.” I sip my coffee.

She scolds, “He told you he loved you, and you don’t believe him?”

“I don’t know. I think he means what he says, but I’m afraid he loves his ex still, as well.”

“But he told you he loves you and not her.”

I nod. “Pretty much.”

“Girl, you’re not making any sense. I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The problem is me,” I say. “I’m afraid something bad will happen, and that he’ll end up leaving me.”

“Just like your parents and your grandparents,” she says with a groan. “Girl, I’m so sorry. But you need to give Kaison more of a chance. How will you ever find happiness when you push it away?”

“That’s a very good question.”

“I know what we need,” she says. “Let’s go shopping. You need another makeover to cheer you up. And don’t argue with me. You really will feel better when we’re done. It’s good for your mental health.”

I don’t argue with her. Since I’ve been at the Keiths’ I’ve been a bit dressier and less afraid of getting hit on at work. And now, for some reason, I don’t care so much about what the guys at work think. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that Kaison and I fell in love. I’ve grown to love myself more during that time period. Kaison has shown me I’m someone worth caring about even when I’m not dolled up.

And I’m not scared to be dolled up either. “Actually, a makeover could be fun,” I say.

“Yes!” Farah cheers. “We need to head to the mall, pronto.” She sets her coffee mug in the sink. “Let’s take showers and get ready and head out.”

After my shower, I take the time to blow dry my hair and put some contacts in. I hadn’t even brought any to Blue Mountain, so it felt different to have them in my eyes. I’d grown so used to wearing glasses that I barely recognized myself without them. But I like what I see. I’d been hiding behind the glasses, and there’s something freeing about ditching them. For the first time in a long time, I feel pretty again.

And this time it’s my choice. I’m not letting someone else pressure me. I’m doing this because I want to. And who cares about the idiot men at the office? Shouldn’t I be able to dress however I want? I mean, as long as it’s office attire. I wouldn’t show up in a midriff-baring halter top or anything. But I can dress classy and more feminine. Maybe introduce some floral pieces or something.

When I walk out of the bathroom, Farah whistles. I’d put on makeup, and my hair was loose and shiny around my shoulders. I had on a white sweater dress and gray

leggings with brown boots.

“You look good, girl. I would have thought I’d dressed you.”

“I have a few cute things in my closet, despite how it may seem,” I say.

“But you can use more.”

When we get to the mall, Farah leads me from store to store, and I score a blue dress for the office and a bunch of floral blouses and dresses. I buy several new pairs of boots with—gasp—heels on them. And they actually aren’t that bad.

“It’s kind of fun to put all this money I’ve made to good use.”

“I bet you made a fortune building that software for them,” Farah says.

“Let’s just say that my bank account isn’t hurting at the moment.” In fact, I have more money in my account than I’ve ever had before.

“And you want to quit your job?” Farah shakes her head at my stupidity.

“Maybe I won’t,” I say.

“You’d be stupid to. And you need to call Kaison and tell him that you take it all back.”

“You know what? I think you’re right.”

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“Of course I am. I’m always right when it comes to these things. Remember who dragged you kicking and screaming to the club that night when you’re tucking Kaison Jr. into bed at night.”

“She doesn’t have a big ego at all,” I say to the little old lady with bleached blonde hair in line behind us in the food court.

“It sounds like your friend has some pretty good ideas there,” the woman says. “Don’t mind me, I was just very entertained by your conversation. It sure beats being bored in line.”

We laugh and step up to the Japanese place to order some chicken teriyaki.

Once we have our food, I choose a table, and we settle down. I check my phone to see I’ve missed a call from Kaison.

I shoot him a text. Sorry I missed your call. What can I do for you?

Are you going to be home today?

I’m heading there in the next thirty minutes. Why do you ask?

I just tried stopping by, but you weren’t home. I have something for you.

How does he know where I live?

“Who’s that?” Farah twists noodles around her fork.

“It’s Kaison. He tried to stop by.”

Farah squeals so loud the people at the table nearby look over at us.

“You’re making a scene,” I hiss at her.

“I don’t care. Haven’t you ever seen a romance movie? This is the grand gesture scene!”

“I think you’re reading way too much into this,” I say. Because my life is far from a fairytale or romcom or whatever you want to call it. I don’t get happily ever afters. It may look that way for a while, but then horrible things happen to me, and I’m worse off than when I started.

“I’m not. You’ll see.” Farah shuts the box of food.

“What are you doing? We just sat down.”

“How can you eat at a time like this?” She looks over my outfit. “You look good. No need to change.”

“Thanks.” For once, Farah isn’t complaining about how I’ve chosen to dress. I close my food—Farah is right. I’m too nervous to eat now.

I text Kaison, and we make plans to meet him at my place in forty-five minutes. That will give me enough time to pick my bra up from my bedroom floor. Not that I’m thinking he’ll go in there or anything, but you never know. We may want to have a conversation without Farah monitoring the entire thing.

When I finally have my place cleaned up and my purchases stowed away in my closet, there’s a knock on my door.

I swing it open, and Kaison is standing there with a big bouquet of red roses. Suddenly, it's hard to breathe. This is it. The grand gesture Farah was talking about. I'm not sure I can handle a grand gesture. Why allow myself to get my hopes up?

He looks good in a suit and tie with a slight stubble across his face that makes me want to reach out and touch it to see what it feels like beneath my fingers.

"Hi, Kaison," Farah says. "It's great to see you."

"Hi, Farah," he says, and I remember they knew each other from going to the club and from brushing shoulders at Georgia's elite gatherings.

"I'll just be in my room if you need anything."

Well, I was wrong about her. The girl knows how to make herself scarce. I feel bad for doubting her.

I take the flowers from Kaison. "I'll just go put these in some water. Come on in."

He follows me into the kitchen. We have an abundance of vases from all the flowers Farah has gotten over the years from various boyfriends. Not one for me.

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I fill the vase with water and place the roses inside. “I don’t think anyone has ever gotten me roses before,” I say.

“Well, that’s just a shame. Get used to getting them more from me. That is if you want them.”

“Let’s talk about that.” I lead him to our gray leather couch and we sit. “I’m scared, Kaison. I’m scared of losing this love that I’m feeling for you.”

His eyes light up with hope. He’d looked a bit unsure before. “So you admit you still love me?”

“Of course, silly. I can’t just turn that off. Not when you’re so hot and muscley and have that stubble thing going on.”

He rubs a hand over his jaw, and that just makes everything so much better. I pick up a coaster from the side table and start fanning myself. But the thing is so stinking small it doesn’t do much to cool me down. What was I thinking, anyway? Like fanning would cool me off around Kaison. The guy is smoking. And he looks like home. This is exactly why I knew I had to stay away from him. Because when he’s around me, I can’t resist him.

“So you’re attracted to me, and you’re in love with me. But you don’t want a relationship?”

“I—” I hesitate, searching for the right words. “I don’t know, Kaison. I’m still figuring all this out.”

“Why do you think you’re going to lose me?”

“Because everyone I love leaves.”

“Do you love Farah?” he asks.

“Well, yes.”

“She’s still around.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way.

“Not everyone is going to leave you, Ariana. I don’t plan to ever do that. I don’t care what Blair told you. I’m here and I’m sticking around as long as you’ll have me. I have no feelings left for her. After the way I feel about you, I can see now that I didn’t really love Blair. I loved the idea of finding someone who wanted to be with me. I was mourning the loss of a serious relationship. Not her.”

“That... that makes sense.” A huge burden lifts off my heart. “You mean you’re going to stick around for real?” I feel so scared, so vulnerable.

It’s like Kaison can pick up on that because his eyes are the most tender and loving that I’ve ever seen them. “I don’t think you can get rid of me. I’m madly in love with you, Ariana. I was a fool to let you walk away like that.”

“Well, I did tell you I wanted you to. You were only respecting what I was saying.”

“And that’s a good thing. But it doesn’t mean I’m not going to try again after the dust has settled a little.”

I nod. “That’s fair.”

“I had a little convincing from Weston and Callie.”

“Oh, really?” Now this I want to hear.

“They ordered a helicopter for me to ride back in and had my car sent over. I was going to come see you that night, but then it got late and I figured you were asleep.”

I laughed. “I totally wasn’t. I was up late finishing your book.”

His eyes light up. “You finished it?”

“Yep. And I’ve already bought book two. I’ll probably start on that tonight.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” he growls low in his throat, and goosebumps raise on my arms.

“So you’re saying you have plans for me?” I ask.

“Have you ever been in a helicopter?” he asks.

I shake my head.

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“Turns out I did a little research on your building and would you believe your building has a helipad on the roof?”

“I had no idea. I’ve never been up there before.”

“How would you like to see what the view of Atlanta is like from up there?” he asks with a grin. “And... maybe a bit more than that?”

My heart pounds. “That would be amazing.” And very unexpected. First a Lamborghini, and now a helicopter? Life with Kaison around is constantly full of surprises. The good kind too.

“Ready to go?”

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KAISON

Watching the joy on Ariana’s face as the helicopter lifts off is something I’ll never forget. I have Rob fly over midtown and then past Stone Mountain. We fly over I-285 and look down at the poor fools stuck in traffic. I point down.

“That right there is why I don’t drive very far when I’m in Atlanta.”

She giggles, and it’s the most carefree I’ve seen her in a long time. I love this woman, heart and soul, and I will never let her be the one that gets away. And I’ll never drive in traffic, unless she asks me to for some reason. For her, I would.

We end the night with dinner at one of my favorite restaurants, a place that makes the best sushi imaginable.

“I just realized something,” she says. “This is our first real date.”

“I told you I’d take you out. There’s a lot more than this coming too. I want to show you the world. We can even go see your family in Iran, if you want.”

Her lips part. “I’ve never met my grandparents there.”

“I know. I think it’s about time you went. Do you have a passport?” I ask.

She nods. “Not that I’ve ever used it. I’ve always been too busy working to travel.”

“Well, now that this project is done, maybe we can take some time off to celebrate. I’m pretty sure I can convince your boss to let you off for a bit.”

She laughs. “We have to get through Christmas first.”

“Yes. My mom was so upset when she found out you didn’t want to come for Christmas. And she’s pretty furious with Blair too. She found her hanging around the coffee shop again and gave her a piece of her mind. I don’t think Blair will be coming around anymore after the tongue lashing she received.”

“Don’t mess with Mama,” Ariana jokes.

“Not if you value your well-being. She doesn’t appreciate people keeping her from getting her grandbabies, and Blair did that twice.”

“Once when she cheated on you and you didn’t get to propose to her, and then when she tried to scare me off.”

“Exactly. I’m not too happy with Blair either. I sent her a message on social media and told her to stay away from us.”

“How did she respond?” Ariana asks.

“She tried to argue with me, and finally I just blocked her.”

“Good for you,” Ariana said. “Boundaries are a good thing.”

Our food arrives, and I pick up a tuna roll with some chopsticks. “This is perfection. It’s the only place in town that rivals the sushi you get in the nice restaurants in Japan.”

“I’ve always wanted to travel,” Ariana says. “But I’ve always been too focused on work to do it.”

“Well, if you decide to stick around, there will be many opportunities for you to travel. We have offices worldwide, and we need to train them on how to use the new software you developed. I’m sure that’s what my dad will be talking with us about at our meeting tomorrow.”

“Really?” Ariana squeaks. “I could travel the world?”

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“You would need to. And I’m sure they would provide you with a nice amount of money for meals. All your hotels and flights would be paid for. Like I said, we’ll hear more about how to move forward. So how is the project going, anyway?”

“All finished up and ready to present to the board.”

I reach out and high-five her. It’s not exactly the most polite behavior for a fancy place like this, but I don’t care. I’m so proud of the work that we’ve done and how far we’ve come as coworkers, friends, and finally as a couple. Ariana has come a long way. In fact... “There’s something different about you tonight.”

She smiles. “Yeah, no glasses.”

“I know, but it’s more than that. And you look fantastic, by the way.” Breathtakingly gorgeous. “What I’m seeing is this air of confidence. Maybe inner peace or something.” I cock my head to the side. “Do I sound crazy?”

“No, but I’m impressed you noticed. I’ve been doing some soul searching lately. Trying to find love and confidence in myself. Farah has been talking to me about it. You know, the reason I didn’t want to take our relationship to the next level is because I’m afraid of getting abandoned because of what happened in my childhood. I guess I have some trauma I need to work out in therapy. Farah recommended someone really great that’s helped her through some past breakups.”

“Good for you,” I say. “It can be pretty scary to look inside yourself like that. Not everyone wants to know what they might find.”

“It hasn’t been easy, and I know I have a long road ahead of me, but I can see now that it’s not worth it to allow my fear to keep me from being with you. I love you, Kaison. I always will. I want to work by your side in this company, make it huge. Does that mean I’m not scared of losing you? No. But it’s something I’m working on. But today I’m not going to worry about it. I’m going to trust you. It’s time for me to put my happiness first. So I guess that’s why I’m dressed like this today. It’s an outward expression of how I feel inside, of the growth I’ve made.”

“You can dress however you want. You’re gorgeous both ways. And you’ll command respect either way. You’ve earned it by putting together a product that will save the company billions worldwide. There won’t be a person in that conference room tomorrow who won’t think you’re incredible. Trust me.”

“It means a lot to hear you say that about the way I dress. I’ve been a little worried that maybe you were only attracted to the club version of me and not the everyday office Ariana. So it means a lot to hear you say that. I know I put on this brave face, but underneath my tough persona, I’m still a woman who longs to be loved and spoiled by her man with roses and a nice helicopter ride. It’s not too much to ask, is it?”

I laugh. “Not when you’re talking to me.” I have much more than helicopter rides planned for this woman. I plan to spoil her as much as I can, beyond anything she can imagine for herself.

And I can’t wait to see the joy on her face it brings.

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ARIANA

I wear my new blue dress to the office the next day. After getting there early, I set up

my laptop and connect it to the big screen that we have for presenting things. There are definitely some looks from some of the men in the office, but I find I don't care. They can stare all they want. I've proven my worth in this company. I can be a successful woman and a beautiful woman all at the same time, and I don't need to hide beneath boxy suits and tight buns. Those buns always gave me headaches, anyway. There's something so freeing about having my hair down like this.

Kaison's dad walks in next, before the others have arrived. "Oh, hi, Mr. Keith, good morning."

"And good morning to you. I'm excited to see what you have prepared for us."

"Thanks. I'm not nervous at all," I lie.

He laughs. "It's okay to be nervous. But from what Kaison has told me, you have nothing to worry about. You're going to knock it out of the park."

"It's true, I did tell him," Kaison says, walking into the room. He looks handsome, although his stubble is shaved off. I can understand that, though. He probably wants to look as professional as possible. The nice thing about my blue dress is that it's very professional. I have nothing to worry about, but it is a perfect fit for me and shows that I at least have some feminine curves to me. I don't need to hide anymore. Thanks to me, and thanks to Kaison, too.

The room fills up quickly and I feel this cross between stage fright and excitement. I look out into the sea of all white men. One of the first things I want to do is add some diversity to this group, starting with some women. I need girls to work with, not just a bunch of men. I'll have to talk to Kaison and his dad about the issue soon.

The meeting is a success. I get through all my material and answer the questions at the end. I had nothing to worry about, after all, because the questions were easy to

answer. The room fills with applause when I'm finished with my slideshow.

When the room is clearing out, Kaison pulls his dad aside. "Can I borrow you for a second?" he asks. "I want to talk to you about something. But I hope you don't mind. It's not really work related."

"Okay," his dad says. "After that meeting, you can tell me whatever you want right now. Our company will be taken to a whole new level from this. That girlfriend of yours is a keeper, son. She's likely our most valuable employee right now."

That's higher praise than I feel I deserve, but I'll take it. It doesn't hurt to be on your boss's good side.

"So, what did you want to tell me?" Mr. Keith asks his son.

"Do you need me to step out so you two can speak privately?" I ask. I have no idea what Kaison's about to tell him.

"No," Kaison says. "You already know about this, anyway."

My eyebrow shoots up, and I wait to hear what coming next.

"I've been keeping something from you and the rest of the family."

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“And Ariana knows when we don’t?”

I put my hands in the air. “Hey, I told him to tell you.” I bite my bottom lip. “I mean, if that’s what he’s going to tell you.”

“It is. And she’s the reason I’m telling you now. She made some pretty good points.” He takes a breath. “I’m a published author.”

“What are you talking about?” Kaison’s dad slides back into the seat he’d been sitting in. “You wrote a book and never told us?” I can see the hurt crossing his features, but then he smiles. “Well, that’s beside the point,” Mr. Keith says. “Do you have a copy? I’d like to see it for myself.”

“Yes”—Kaison unzips his laptop bag and pulls out a paperback copy of the book I’d just finished. “This is my top selling book.”

“You mean, you’ve written more than one?” his voice sounds incredulous.

“Well... yes.”

I’ve looked him up. He’s written twenty books.

He hands the book to his dad, and Mr. Keith’s brow furrows. “This can’t be it.”

“I can assure you, it is,” Kaison says.

“But, no. I’ve read this book,” Mr. Kaison goes on. “I read it on the trip I took with

your mom last summer to the island we were looking at buying.”

“You’ve read it?” I ask. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“I read the entire series. It hooked me from the first page, and I had to read everything the author wrote.” He points to his son in disbelief. “That was you? You’re David Edwardson?”

“Yes, sir. That’s my penname.”

His dad shakes his head. “I even got your mom to read them, too. All along, we had no idea it was our son.” His brow furrows for a moment like he’s thought of something. “Wait a second. That dish you describe with the apples and onions fried in butter. That’s what Lidia cooks for us from time to time.”

Kaison chuckles. “Yeah.”

“I thought that was a little strange. I’ve never talked to anyone else who’s tried apples and onions together.” He shakes his head. “I can’t believe it. How could you have hidden something like this from us? You’re incredibly famous!”

“I’m sorry, Dad. I’ve been so overshadowed by our family success. I felt like I needed to prove to myself that I can make a name for myself without riding on our family coattails.”

“Well, you’ve certainly done that.”

“I stuck to a small budget. I haven’t wanted anyone to think I bought my success.”

“No, no. Your writing speaks for itself. It’s very, very good. You know it is when your mom picks up something that isn’t a romance and then reads the entire series.”

I can't help but laugh. "I'm a romance writer too, and I loved his first book. I only just finished it, and I keep thinking about it. What's that called again?" I think for a minute. "A book hangover?"

Kaison laughs. "Yeah, I've heard that term before. I think a few people have mentioned that in their reviews."

"So what's your next step? Your series is finished, right?" Mr. Keith asks.

"Yeah, I'm hoping to hit a bestseller list with this next book I'm writing. It's not easy to do, so I'm putting my all into it."

"Well, that's just great. I'm so proud of you, son. I only wish you'd told us earlier. Do you need us to keep it a secret, or can I tell your mom? You know she won't keep it quiet."

I laugh. "Isn't that the truth. She's going to want to post all about it on social media."

"You know my wife well," Mr. Keith says. He turns to Kaison. "So how do you feel about us telling people?"

"I never thought I'd say this, but I'm finally ready to go public. I think I'm over the idea of having to prove myself. I've learned by having Ariana in my life that I'm great just as I am without proving my worth to the world. It's quite the freeing feeling."

Mr. Keith's smile is wide and proud, and he stands, pulling Kaison into a hug. "You are worth more than you know. I can see it, and it looks like Ariana sees it, too."

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A warmth fills my chest at his words. “I absolutely do. I’m in love with your son, Mr. Keith. Meeting him was the best thing to ever happen to me.”

Kaison laughs. “Well, you’ve sure changed your mind about that. Did you know she rejected me when I tried to flirt with her at the club when I first met her?”

Mr. Keith laughs. “I bet you weren’t used to that.”

“It’s what made me want her. I knew she was different right from the start. Definitely a keeper.” He threads his fingers through mine, and the warm fuzzies travel from my head to my toes.

I look up into his blue eyes, and my heart overflows with love for this man who started out as my enemy. Boy, things have changed now. I don’t know what I would have done without him. I’m a changed woman, and so very happy.

We have a bright future ahead of us, and I, for one, can’t wait to find out what’s in store. Maybe babies with Kaison’s eyes and a very happy grandma.

* * *

Callie and Weston sit at the foot of the twenty-foot-tall tree as Angel rips the wrapping paper from the set of stacking cups Grandma has brought her. She squeals in delight and claps her hands and then proceeds to figure out how to open the plastic packaging. Eventually she gives up and just sucks on it instead.

Mittens and Zeb are chasing each other through the discarded wrapping paper,

occasionally attacking each other and rolling around like one giant bundle of gray-stiped fur. It reminds me of the old fashioned cartoons that show a cloud of dust with an occasional leg or arm protruding when people get into a fight. TV sure was a lot more violent for kids back then.

Angel grabs ahold of Zeb's tail, and he turns around and gently licks at her hand, like he knows she's a baby and he has to be careful with her. But he's not exactly enjoying having his tail pulled, either.

"No, no, Angel," Callie says, prying her little fingers loose.

Kaison and I are snuggled up on the couch, taking in the joyful scene around us.

"Kaison, you have a ring under that tree for Ariana?" his mom asks.

Kaison laughs. "I think we're going to take things a little slower than that. We've only been together a few weeks. And if I did have a ring under the tree, you would have ruined a pretty great surprise."

I know I would have said yes if Kaison popped the question now, but I'm glad he's not rushing things. I want to take my time to get to know him better, to open up to each other on a deep, meaningful level. Things like that can take a while. And I'm okay with that. As long as I get to see Kaison.

The software had its official launch last week before everyone started their holiday vacation time, and it's already showing a significant amount of savings for the company. Kaison and I went out to celebrate the night after the program launched, and I quickly learned that I'm going to need to expand my wardrobe quite a bit more if I'm going to be Kaison's girlfriend. Not that I need to. I want to. Because he's taking me to one fabulous restaurant after the other, and I'm having way too much fun getting dressed up.

And the more I dress up, the more I want to buy more cute clothes. Farah has had a heyday going shopping with me, and Kaison's mom got wind of it, too, and now all my presents have been jewelry and clothes and shoes. Stuff I never would have picked out, but totally love now that I'm seeing them. I don't even want to think about how much some of the items cost. But it's important to Mrs. Keith to give the gifts to me. It's one of the ways she shows love.

Kaison finally told all his family about his book series, and he went public with it. He even landed a few tv interviews after his mom blasted social media with the news of his identity.

They've had to tighten security on the property because there were some paparazzi sneaking around the grounds.

Langston and Brensen are the next two to get gifts. They rip open the packages, and each of them hold up something knitted and ivory-colored.

"What is this?" Langston asks. Mittens runs up to it and bats at the dangling corner like Langston is playing a game just for her.

His mom just giggles. "You won't need it just yet, but if all goes well, you'll be glad you have it."

"It looks like some sort of blanket," Brensen says. "But it's tiny."

"That's because it's a baby blanket, you bozos," Weston says.

Langston tosses his to the side like it's burned his fingers. "No way am I getting some girl knocked up anytime soon."

"Mom," Brensen complains. "Are you serious?"

“Well, all my friends get to knit baby blankets. It’s only fair that I get to make some too. You won’t even have to hold onto them. I’ll keep them safe for you.”

“Good, because I don’t want some girl finding that at my place and thinking I’m desperate for a kid,” Langston says.

“Well, Jenni already knows Mom wants you to give her grandbabies, so it’s too late there,” Weston teases.

“I told you already. Jenni is off limits. Her brother would come after me if I tried to date his sister. I don’t want to mess with Ronnie. I don’t care how much you want me to date Jenni.”

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“Good grief,” Brensen says. “Way to rant about it.”

“What about you, Brensen?” I ask. “You have any girls in mind?”

“Brensen isn’t around enough to meet anyone. The guy keeps touring Africa,” Kaison says.

“Well, maybe he’ll find someone there,” I say. “You never know.”

“That’s true,” Kaison says. “I never thought I’d find someone at work, but here we are.”

“Just don’t fire me, Mr. Keith,” I say, looking at Kaison’s dad.

“You can call me Wes when we’re here at the house,” he says.

I’m at a loss for words for a minute. Finally, my brain decides to work again. “Yes, sir. I mean, okay, Wes. Thank you. That’s quite the honor.” His name is Weston Keith Jr., and he goes by Wes to differentiate between himself and Weston the third.

“You’re my son’s girlfriend. I don’t see why you need to still be so formal.”

“And that means you can call me Laurie,” Kaison’s mom says. “Enough with this Mrs. Keith business. I get why you did it before since you were an employee, and while you technically still are, I consider you a daughter. I’d say you should call me Mom, but maybe we’ll save that for whenever Kaison stops getting cold feet and finally decides to pop the question.”

I laugh. “That sounds great to me,” I say.

My heart is so full at this moment. I’m surrounded by people I love, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I look up into Kaison’s eyes, and he gazes down at me and smiles, leaning down to kiss me.

Cheers and catcalls erupt throughout the room, and we just ignore them as we blissfully lose ourselves into our own little world.

I have more than I ever could have asked for. And I’m never letting this one go.

The End

* * *